Rainbow World

NIKOLAI SLADKOV

Raduga Publishers

Red
Steppe

Orange
Ruins

Yellow
Sands

Green
Valley

Blue Lake

Blue Mountains

Mauve Canyon

Red Hills

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Rainbow World

A rainbow spans the whole horizon,
Its colours true and clear:
Red, orange, yellow,
Green, blue and violet.
Torrents of rain and light,
Flying through the rainbow,
Coloured the earth they fell upon;
The valleys, and the mountains,
The steppes, and the hills.
Let us walk under the rainbow.
And as we pass through this arch
We shall step on the varicoloured earth
And meet its varicoloured inhabitants ...

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from the Russian by
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Moscow

Н. Сладков

ДЕТИ РАДУГИ

На английском языке

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Amazingly,
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Only yesterday everything
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RED STEPPE

Amazingly, the land in the distance had turned red overnight! Only yesterday everything was a dull green, and now strange and unexpected red streaks had appeared at the foot of the distant blue mountains. As though someone had lined off with a red crayon the blue mountains from the green plain. No, it was not the setting sun, nor a field of scattered bright red stones, nor a steppe fire.

We urged our horses on, and the nearer we came the brighter and the wider were those puzzling streaks of red. Good Lord, they were poppies! Ordinary red poppies, millions of them, dancing and flashing in the wind, dazzling you and making your head spin.

The rises, covered with poppies, were like waves on a red sea, rolling waves with fiery-red crests, and they seemed to be coming at us, threatening to knock us over and drown us in the red flood.

The ground underfoot seemed to be on fire, the whole steppe was aflame. The white wings of the hen-harriers looked pink as the birds swooped over the red waves. Red-looking beetles were feeding on the red petals. Emerald bee-eaters flashed past like strange flying fish. And fiery zigzags flickered in the black eyes of our horses.

Even the white clouds had turned pink, and the clear blue sky itself seemed to be filmed with a rosy haze.

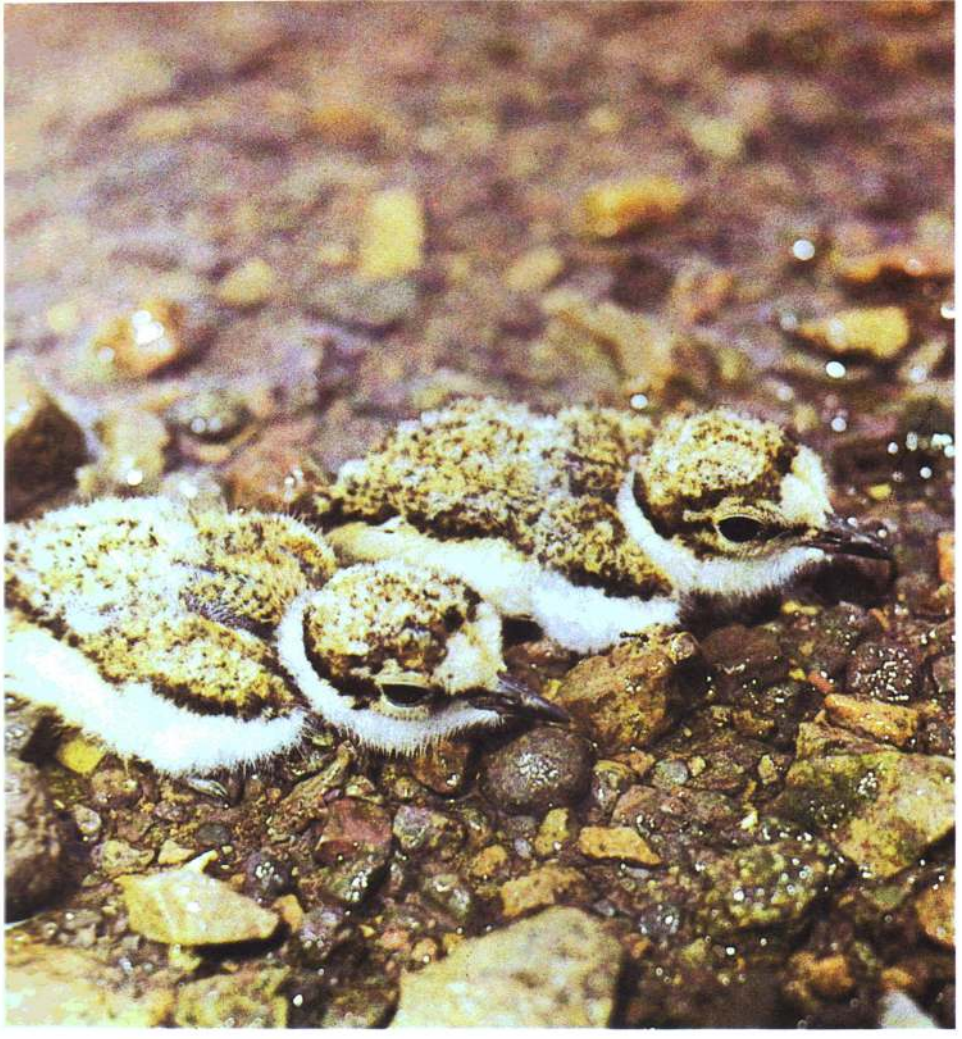
Poppies, poppies as far as the eye could see. A riot of colour. A seething lava of bright red flowers!

WHITETHROAT

The whitethroat's beak is so small that it's only good for carrying flies, if that. But this mother-bird has five chicks to feed in her nest, and they have such huge gaping mouths that there's simply no filling them. And the moment she appears with some food they all start screaming angrily: "Me! Me! Me first! Me first!"

The poor mother toils without ever resting her wings, fetching 30 breakfasts, 30 dinners and 30 suppers for each of her five children. Try and multiply that! She has no time to eat anything herself, not even one miserable little worm. Oh, how she'd love to rest for a bit, to preen her feathers, and doze in the shade. She hasn't even time to glance up at the sky where a hawk or a harrier might be out hunting, or down on the ground where a fox might be trotting past or a weasel snooping about.

The chicks are shuddering in their impatience and screeching with wide-open mouths: "Me! Me! Me first!" And so off she has to go for more food, then back to the nest, shuttling back and forth the livelong day. If only she had a larger bill! What's one fly at a time for the five of them? It only makes them the hungrier for more.



PLOVER

The mother plover rolled like a little wheel along the bank of a stream, and after her came the baby plovers—for all the world like fancy buttons on short legs. The mother flew across the stream, but the chicks, left behind, dashed about in fright and confusion.

"Chee-ooo!" cried the mother. "Lie down!" Somebody was coming! They flopped down at once and lay still. They may have been just pebbles in shallow water.

I came up and squatted beside them, but they never stirred. I was squatting on dry ground, but they were in the water, poor things. The cold water soaked through their feathers and the hard pebbles stuck into their tummies, but they endured it staunchly, the obedient tots. Good for them, passing that test so splendidly! A hawk would never have noticed them.

I straightened up and quickly walked away. If they stayed in the water much longer they'd catch cold, for after all they were not very strong chicks yet.

BLISTER BEETLES

Blister beetles are as eye-catching in the steppe as death-caps are in the wood. They hang in garlands as though to show off and fear no one. Contrarily, everyone is afraid of them and everyone gives them a wide berth. Animals run past them quickly, birds turn their beaks up, lizards dart out of the way, and even toads aren't tempted by them.

There is a good reason to liken the blister beetles to the death-caps: they are as inedible and poisonous. And their bright red colour is like a warning signal to everyone: DANGER, DO NOT COME NEAR!

And no one does come near or touch them. And if anyone is silly enough to snatch a blister beetle or swallow one with some grass, the price might be death. For a bird or a lizard. For a cow or a horse. Even for a camel.

DEMOISELLE CRANE

A he-crane is dancing in the steppe. The wind ruffles the long, silky white tassels he has on each side of his head, and suddenly stands them up on end like a halo.

But the she-crane takes no notice. She walks about, bends down to peck at something on the ground, and preens herself unhurriedly.

Now the dancer has worked himself up to a frenzy. He is tousled and trembling. If his feathers were made of tin they'd surely clink and jingle. Now he makes small mincing steps, dipping every time, now he drags his wings along the ground and puffs himself up like a turkey cock. All at once he comes to a dead stop and turns to stone. Then, he drops to the ground and jerks and thrashes about like the dying swan in the famous ballet. And here he is up again, whirling about with mincing steps, and again he drags his wide wings and puffs himself up like a turkey cock, his silky tresses ruffled by the wind.

But the she-crane still ignores him.

BUZZARD

In a proper steppe there simply have to be buzzards sitting on mounds, for without them the steppe is not its real self. A proper summer steppe must roll away into a wavering, hazy distance, there must be white feather grass on the rises and streaks of bright red poppies on the level ground. And motionless buzzards everywhere, of course. They either sit still or wheel in the eddying currents of the hot air, rising ever higher and higher into the cool sky above.

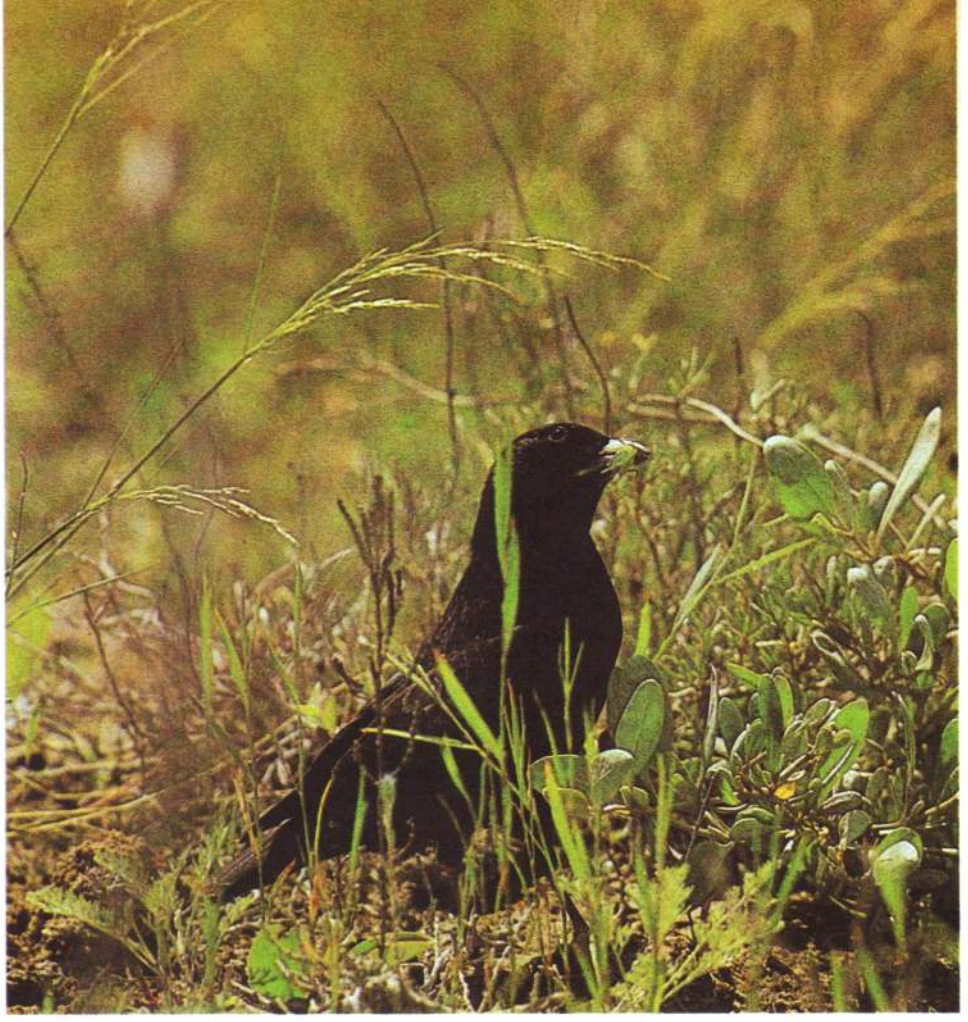
No, that pair of demoiselle cranes down below was not for him, he decided. And as for those plover chicks he'd only make his eyes sore trying to tell them apart from the pebbles lying in the shallow water. There were butterflies flitting about the flowers, but he was too lazy to even move a wing for small fry like that. And those bright red blister beetles were worse than mustard and pepper. Now, what was that moving on the bank of the gully? A gopher! Let it hop further away from its burrow, let it find some sweet grass to eat and screw up its eyes from relish. That would be the moment to fold his wings, let out his talons, and drop like a stone. Maybe he'd get himself a dinner ...

BUTTERFLY

Unfurling its wings like taut twin sails, this tiny flying ship rides the waves of the hot steppeland air so swiftly that anyone who happens to be watching will gasp with admiration. In Russian this butterfly is called *parusnik* from the word *parus*—sail.

It looks lovely when it alights on a flower. It's very pretty with its wings folded, and prettier still when it spreads them out.

All summer long these butterflies adorn the hollows in the steppes and the gullies, and they are always a joy to see. How I wish people would not go chasing after them with nets and stick them on pins afterwards!



BLACK LARK

There are many larks in the steppes: plain larks, horned larks, tufted larks, saltmarsh larks, and desert larks. All of them are modest, inconspicuous birds, the colour of dry earth, and only the black lark leaps to the eye at once. A bird of black velvet, it is noticeable both on the ground and on the dry bushes. But it's most noticeable in the air. It flies in circles, moving its black wings strangely and slowly, and singing. Its singing, like that of other larks, brings life into the emptiness of the steppe. The whole steppe rings with the voices of larks. As you walk along, they pass you on, as it were, from one singer to the next. That's a plain lark; now it's a steppeland lark, and here comes the black lark. Into his song he weaves the melodies of all the other larks, as if singing on his own behalf and on theirs.

GOPHER

The gopher, chilled in his draughty burrow, comes out to warm himself in the sun. He sits up straight, like a circus dog, folds his paws on his tummy, and closes his eyes. Lovely! He turns now one side now the other to the sun, and then starts washing himself, rubbing his face with his paws. Feeling itchy under the left foreleg, he scratches the place with the right paw. Now he runs his claws through the fur on his tummy, combing it. He stretches and yawns contentedly. He smooths out his whiskers, rubs his eyes, and looks about him.

No enemies about, either on the ground or up in the sky. The very time to eat in peace. A salad of grass, garnished with a few flowers, will make a nice meal. But he has to keep his eyes skinned as he eats, in case a fox or an eagle should decide to make a meal of him!

What might have been the remains of pyramids, towers, castles, columns and towering fortress walls were clearly etched in the light of the setting sun.

"It can't be, it simply cannot be!" I said to myself when I first saw that mass of orange shapes. What might have been the remains of pyramids, towers, castles, columns and towering fortress walls were clearly etched in the light of the setting sun. The brilliance of the colours was truly dazzling and the eye simply could not take in the whole picture presented by all those extraordinary shapes.

The orange vision appeared on the edge of the grey, dismal desert as an enchanted land, beautiful and fantastic. A set for an Eastern tale. But in actual fact this was simply coloured clay, eroded by the winds and the rains. A creation of Nature, that greatest of artists.

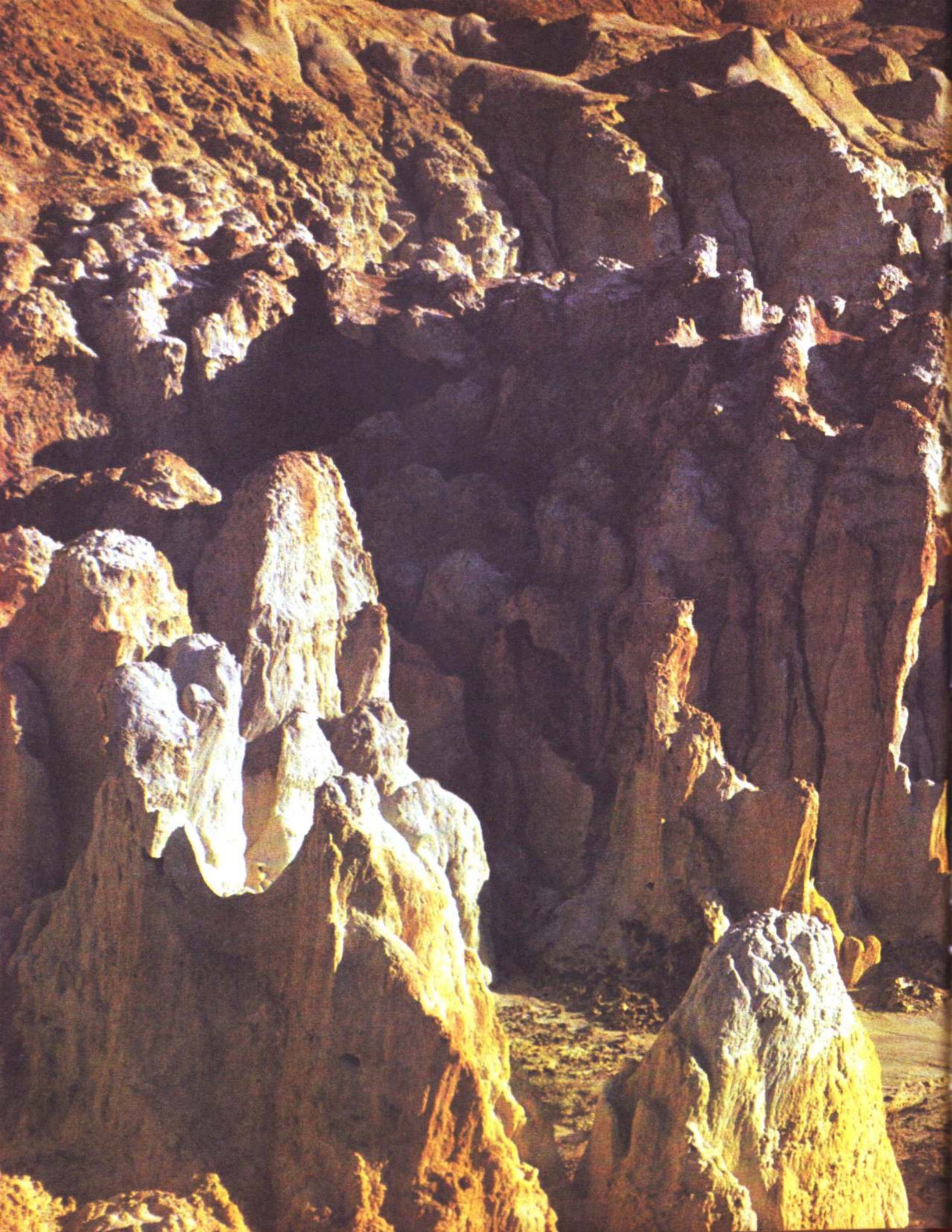
It was not a mirage, it was all real. The rocks were rough and hot to the touch, while the dust on the ground was soft and velvety. I was eager to miss nothing, to

ORANGE RUINS

remember everything I saw. But how could I remember everything when the scene kept changing all the time? You only had to step aside a little to be confronted by quite different pillars, butts, and niches. And as the sun sank lower ever new shapes were lit up and new dark chasms met the eye. And the colours changed too: there was more purple here, more orange there, and a brighter yellow here. That's another great artist for you—the sun!

At daybreak the contours of the rocks are washed down by the cool morning mist. At noon, when the sky is at white heat, the rocks seem to dissolve in the haze and waver in yellow waves. And towards the end of the day they absorb all the rich purples and oranges of the sunset.

It took Nature a thousand years to create this miracle out of yellow clay, moulding, cutting, crumbling, hewing and weathering it, for all to see and admire for thousands of years to come.

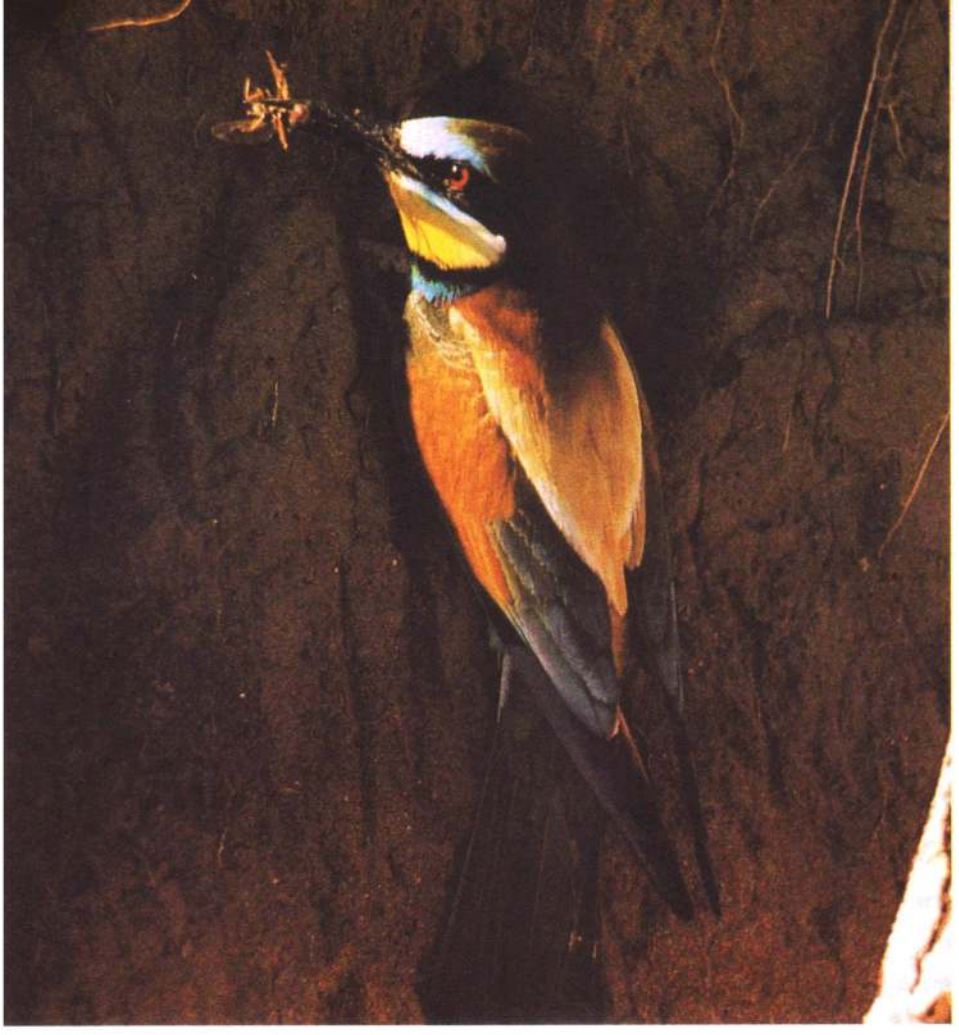


HOOPOE

In flight the hoopoe looks like a large butterfly, and on the ground like a bright flower. Its most striking features are its gorgeous crest and, of course, its long, slender bill.

And oh, how he loves to poke his long nose into every nook and cranny! But the crannies are so narrow in the hard ground and between the rough stones that it's quite a job poking his nose in it, but that's where his prey is hiding, so there's nothing for it.

But one day he saw a spider web glistening deep in a dark cranny and, hooking it up with his bill, he gave it a tug, for no special purpose, just in case. And suddenly the spider came jumping out into the open, imagining perhaps that a grasshopper had got caught in his web. It was no trouble at all for the hoopoe to snap it up. And after that he made a habit of it: whenever he saw a spider web in a cranny he'd give it a tug, lure the spider out into the open and gobble it up. No strain, no pain, and much easier on his bill.



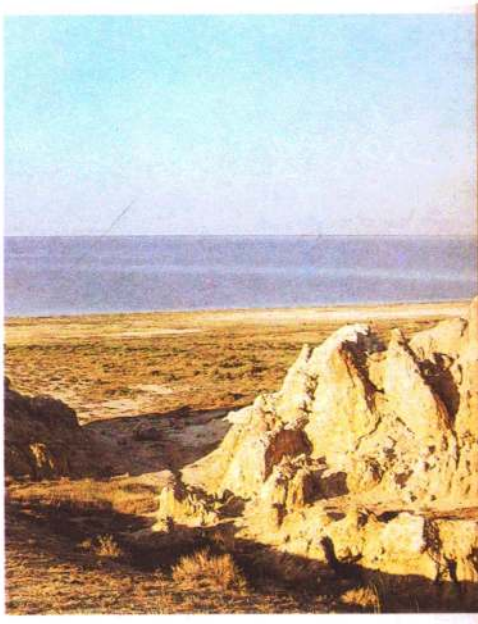
BEE-EATER

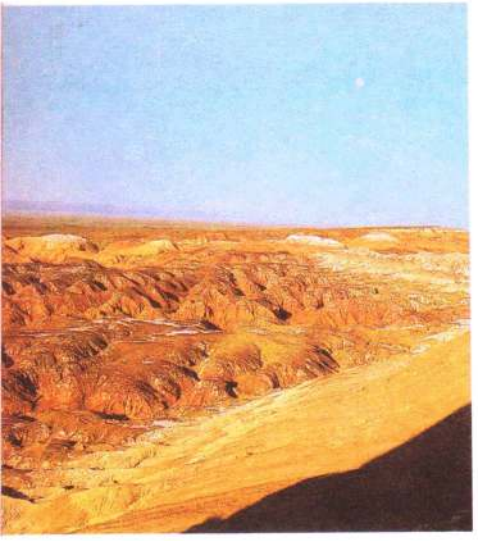
The bee-eater with its golden back and emerald-blue breast is a very pretty bird, and all would be well if only it did not act so true to its name and go hunting bees in the bee gardens. For this the bee-keepers fire at them.

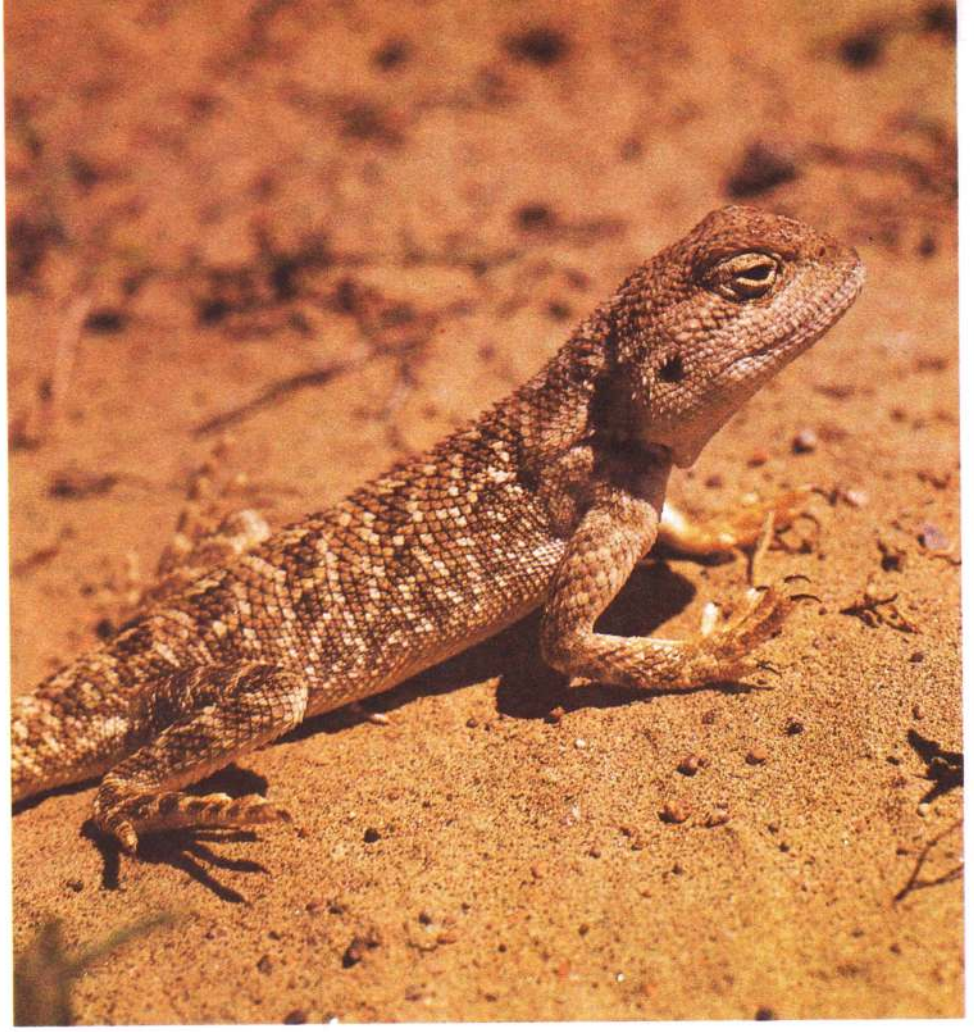
A lot of people love honey, of course. But then a lot of people are also very fond of these pretty birds. And bee-eaters don't only hunt bees, they also catch harmful beetles, locusts, and such like. They even catch hornets, the bees' mortal foes.

And so, dear bee-keepers and honey-lovers, put away your guns and arm yourselves with a tape-recorder instead, and frighten off the bee-eaters not with shots but with recorded alarm signals. Or else just shoo them away with a long stick which has a rag dangling from it. That will keep the bees and the bee-eaters safe.

Bee-eaters are such pretty birds, they are so beautifully coloured, and have such soft, mewing voices, that really they should be admired, not shot.







AGAMA

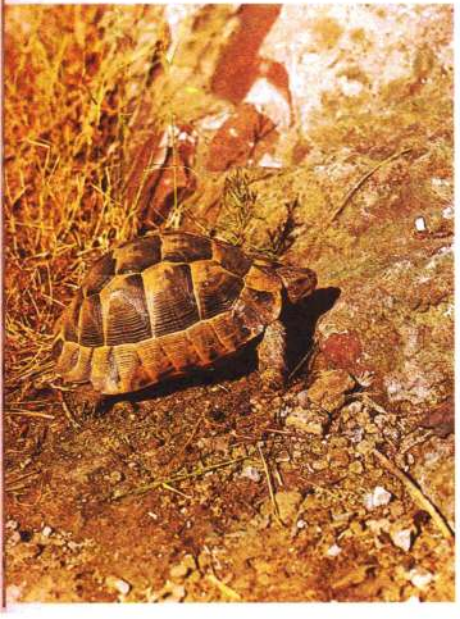
On a dismal morning the agama's mood is as dismal. Small wonder, after getting chilled through in the night and now simply dying of hunger. And that's why it's such a dismal grey colour from the nose to the tip of its tail. You can see at once that it is out of sorts. But the hot sun will quickly warm the sand and the rocks, and then it will crawl out on to a bush. Once there, the agama brightens up, and jolly red spots appear on its back. Much like us flushing with pleasure. By midday it will get warmed through and through to its smallest bone and scale, and if, to crown everything, it's lucky enough to catch a grasshopper then it will literally glow with a chocolate-and-cream pattern, with purple streaks on the sides. If it's a male, its blue dewlap will become inflated from the heat, the excitement, and the pleasure.

GOPHER

The long-tailed gopher is a terrible rowdy. Just let him notice someone and he'll set up a screech at once. He'll get on top of a hummock or a stone and squeal, jerking and jumping, shaking his tail, the screech growing ever louder and shriller. He's ever so fond of eating, but even food he forgets in his excitement, and he squeals with the grass he hasn't swallowed sticking out of his mouth like whiskers. He's not one to be taken unawares, not he!

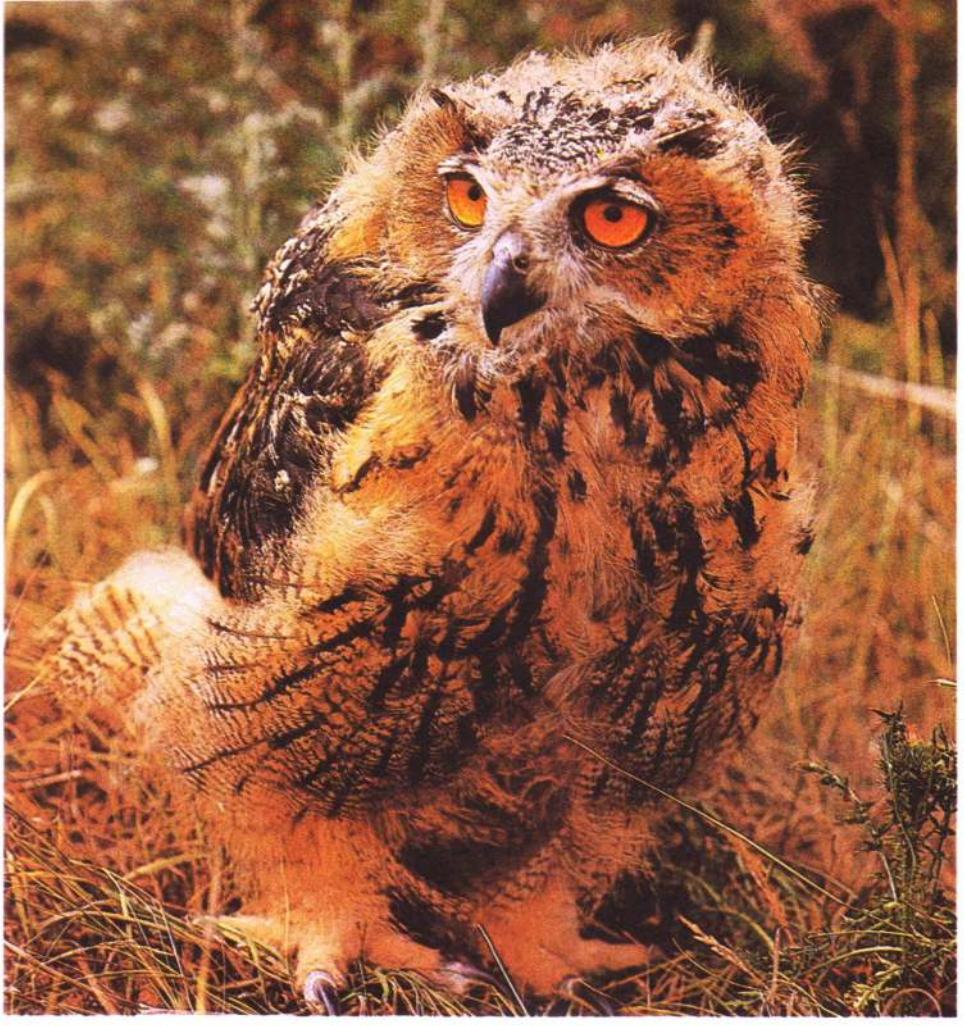
He goes foraging in the fields, but only if they are under grain crops. But what he likes best are abandoned gullies, ditches along the roads, and waste fields of no use to anyone. There he jumps like a squirrel, sits up erect like a hare, or else sprawls on the ground like a badger. He gives voice in a bird-like whistle or a baby pig's squeal when he's happy.

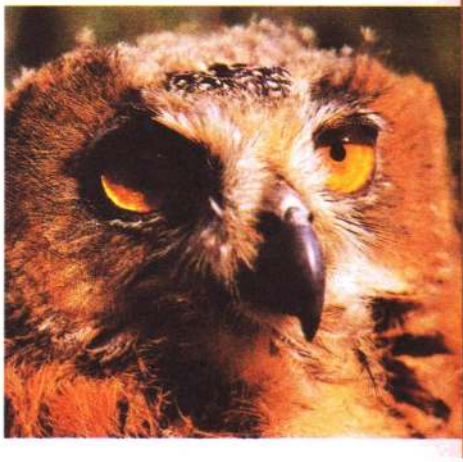
ARROW SNAKE



Late in the afternoon, when the sun begins to slant, you may suddenly notice something glittering on a distant bush and you think that someone has hung a strip of tin on a branch. Actually, it's an arrow snake basking in the sun, or perhaps it's cooling off after the day's heat. Again, it might be simply looking over its domain. The snake's bird-like eyes notice everything: a small animal running along the ground, a bird hovering in the air.

Now, there's a tolai hare hobbling into the shade of a bush. A mouse has poked its head out of its hole, you can see its whiskers flickering. A serpent eagle has flown past, luckily too busy to look down. And here at last comes something that's always welcome—a lizard! The snake takes aim and shoots out, true as an arrow. A wiggle, a flicker, a snatch, then it coils up like a spring and rolls into the shadow of the branches. Out of sight of hostile, envious eyes.

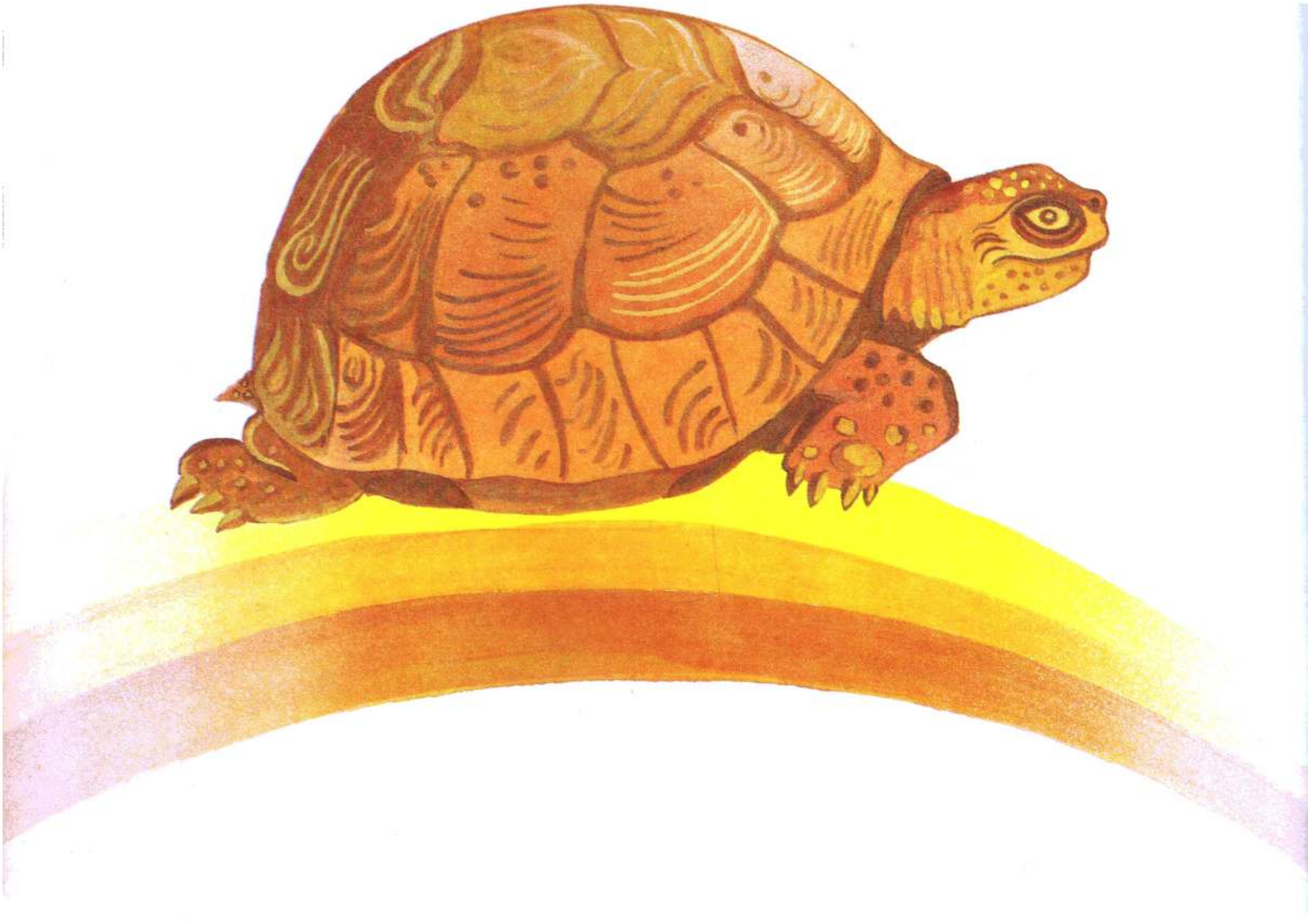




BABY EAGLE OWLS

The mother eagle owl laid two eggs: white, round ones like little balls, and settled down to hatch them. Brooding, she had no idea that strange things were happening to the eggs: they grew lighter by the day! When she laid them they weighed 70 grams each, in ten days they each lost 5 grams, and in twenty they lost a quarter of their original weight. At this rate there'd be nothing but shells left by the end of hatching time!

However, in due course the chicks were safely hatched, and right away they began to put on weight, as much as two grams an hour. They ate ravenously. On the fourth day they doubled their weight, and on the seventh they were four times that! By the time they were ready to leave the nest they were heavier than either of their parents. And they could hardly be called babies now, even though they were still covered with fluff and could not fly yet.



Two winds, clashing at the foot
of the sleepy mountains,
piled the sand up into this enormous hill ...

The sun burns so fiercely as if it's coming through a magnifying glass. Sweat runs into your eyes and makes them smart. The ever thirsty desert flies plaster your face greedily.

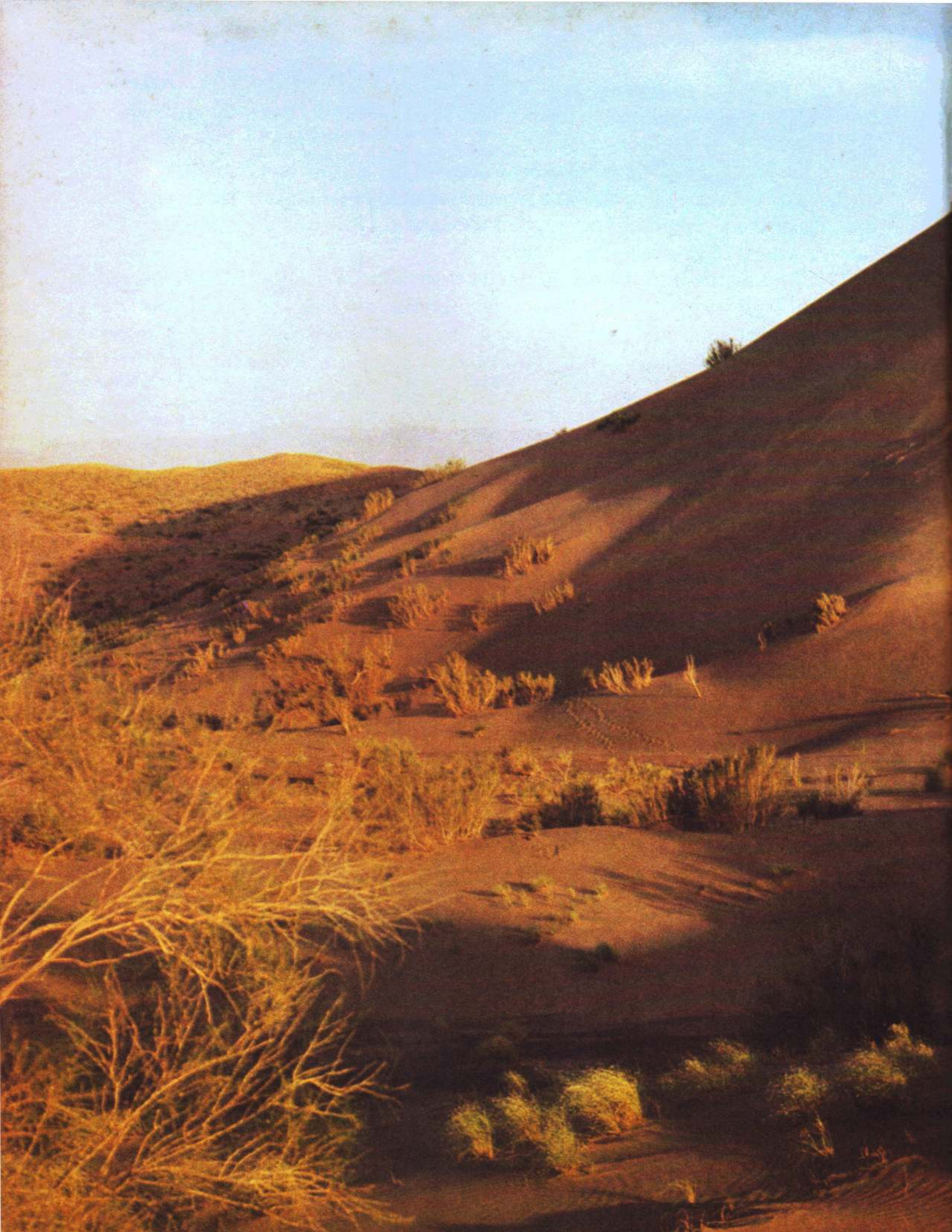
On the very edge of the sandy steppe rise two flat, purple mountains like sleeping turtles, and between them towers a pyramid of golden sand. Two winds, clashing at the foot of the sleepy mountains, piled the sand up into this enormous hill whose summit seems to smoke like a volcano.

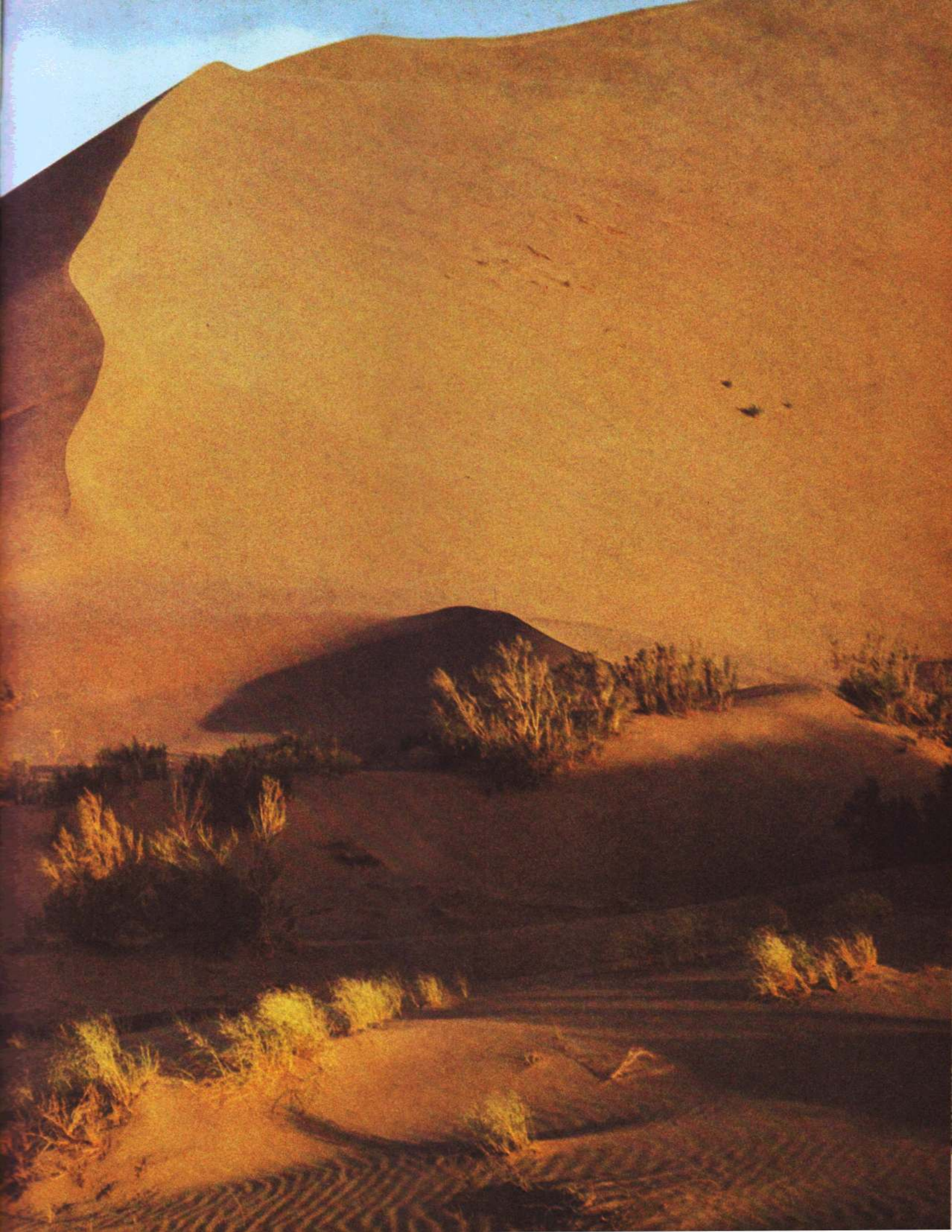
It is best to climb to the top along the ridge. It's slow going, like crawling up a roof. The sand keeps trickling down, creeping over your feet, and quickly smoothing out the indentations you have made in it. What you want most is a drink of water, what with the hot wind blowing into your face and the sand crunching in your mouth.

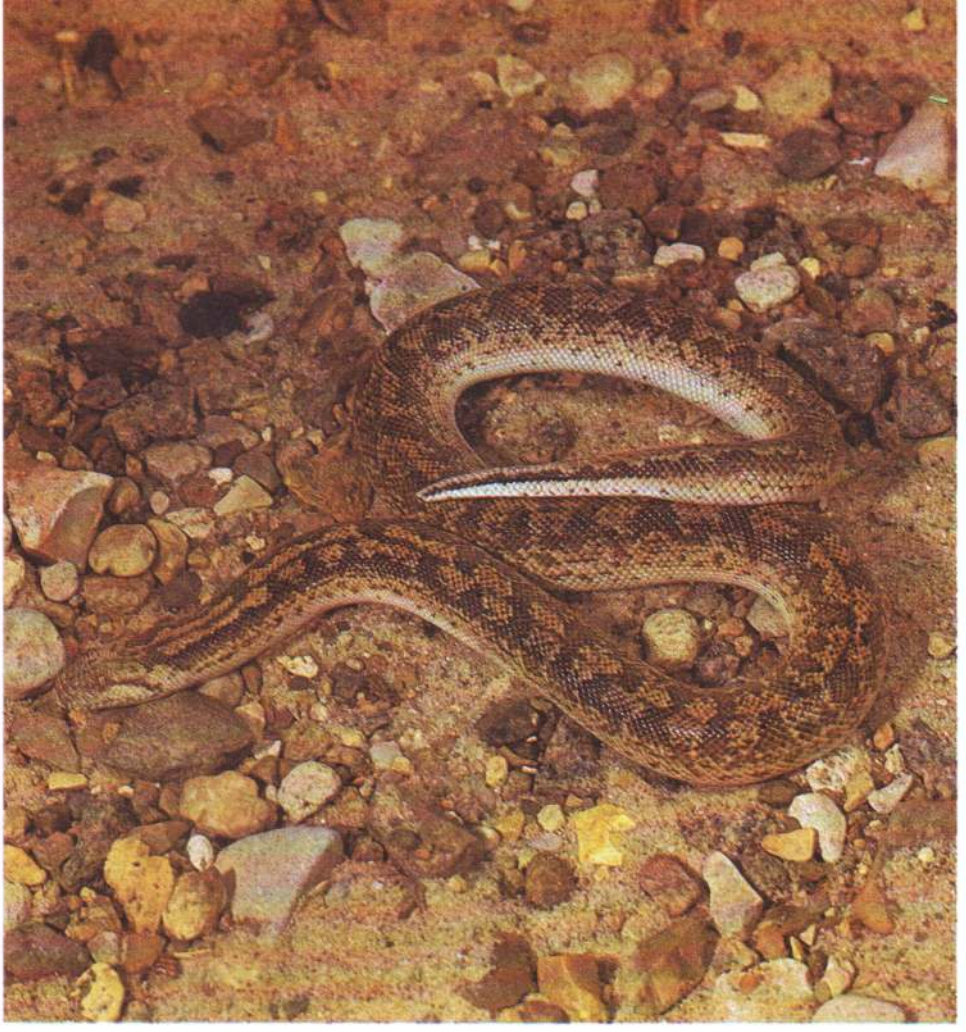
Another thing you want almost as badly is to hear the voice of this hill. This is no ordinary hill, it's a singing hill. From time to time an eerie humming starts in its depths, causing the hill to tremble. The humming swells in volume, bursts out from the depths, and the hollow, alarming, strange sound hangs over the entire steppe. That's the hill "singing". A great many legends have been woven about it, but no one really knows what makes it sing. So far it's only guesswork and surmises.

YELLOW SANDS

We are standing on the very top. But the hill is quiet today. There's only the sound of the wind to hear. Our eyes smart from the blazing sun and the wind. And those tear-drinking flies tickle our faces very nastily ...







SAND-SNAKE

This snake is no more than a metre long, but for the rest it's very much like a boa constrictor. And one that can travel under the sand too. And it's a very clever snake, for all that it's not very big.

Lizards bask in the sun, birds hop about merrily, and little animals scurry there and back with not a care in the world, never suspecting that a sand-snake is there, lying in wait, right under their feet.

He lies still and waits, poking his head out of the sand only far enough to see.

That hare is a bit too far away, he is thinking. And that little bird on the saksaul tree is too high up. Careful! There's a caracal stealing along, looking about him warily, for this desert cat is not used to being about in the daylight, his pupils have contracted into pinpoints, and maybe he won't notice the snake. It's not just mice he catches, but anything that comes his way—spiders, scorpions, lizards, and snakes.

Ah, here's a silly round-headed lizard. It's coming nearer, nearer, nearer. Suddenly the sand heaves, the snake's lithe body shoots out, coils round the lizard, and tightens the knot ...

JERBOA

The jerboas are quaint little animals: they have the body of a mouse, the ears of a rabbit, the legs of a kangaroo, and the tail of a lion with a tassel at the end. In the daytime they sleep, and at night they run about. And how comically they run! All the animals run on four legs, but the jerboas hop on two, like birds.

They are not like anyone else in any respect. There are animals with thin legs, fat legs or long legs, but the jerboas have fluffy legs. There are animals with thin toes or long toes, but the jerboas have humped toes. Other animals may have thick skins or heads, but what the jerboas have are thick tails which serve them in a great many ways: when they sit up their tail is a prop, when they jump it's a balancer, and when they're in danger it helps them to cheat their enemies. Say, a fox, sighting the white tassel, makes a beeline for it. And jerboa swishes its tail to the left and leaps away to the right, leaving the hunter nicely fooled.

PALLAS'S SANDGROUSE

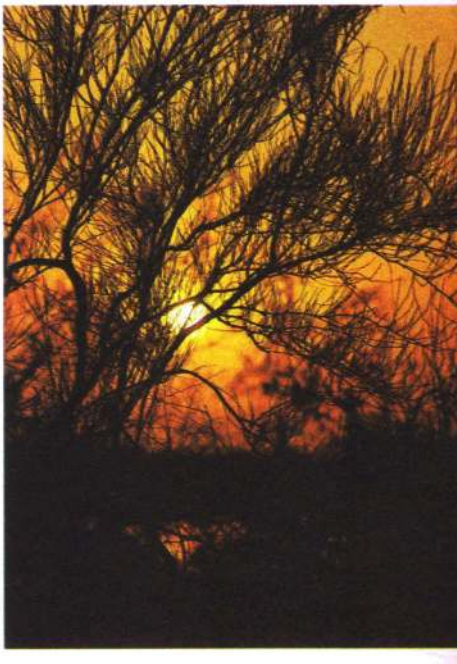
The sea seems desolate if there are no gulls flying about, the woods seem lifeless without the calls of cuckoos, and the dry steppes are dead without the purling song of the swift sandgrouse.

From all over the steppe they flock to the spring for water, and drink long and thirstily. When they've drunk enough, they fill their crop with water to take back to their young.

The sand is burning hot in the dry steppe, the mud has cracked, and the stones have turned black from the sun. The sandgrouses' only salvation is the water. And also their endurance and patience. And also, of course, their sandy coloration and their swift, powerful wings.

The hills seem to heave like waves in the hot shimmering. But as the sandgrouse streak through the haze above the parched desert, they call out in bright, fresh voices and it is like the lovely sound of clear babbling brooks.

HEDGEHOG



This is no ordinary hedgehog. This one has large, keen ears.

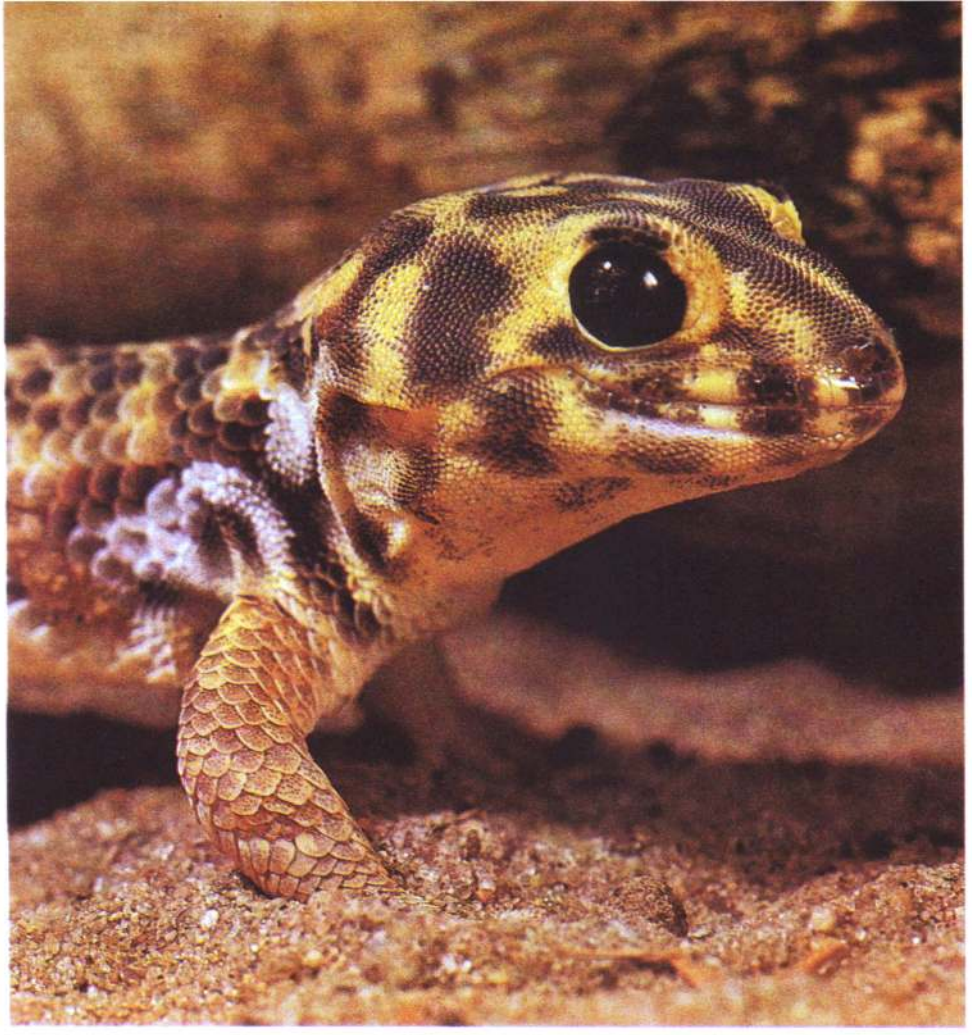
In the dark and silence, the hedgehog emerges from its retreat under a bush and hurries along the sand—ears tipped forward, eyes and nose on the ground. Suddenly, twin green lights appear in a crack in the ground—a tarantula has hidden there. Someone's red, unblinking eyes shine from behind a stone—must be a gecko. There's a gleam of pink eyes behind a tuft of grass, and blue eyes in a saksaul shrub. It's the moon that lights up all the eyes, and the hedgehog is not afraid of them. If he senses danger he'll simply roll himself into a ball with all his spikes out. He'll lie still for a little, and when the danger blows over he'll hurry on his way again, peering about him, sniffing and listening alertly. At night he can't waste time resting, he'll sleep his fill afterwards when the sun is out.

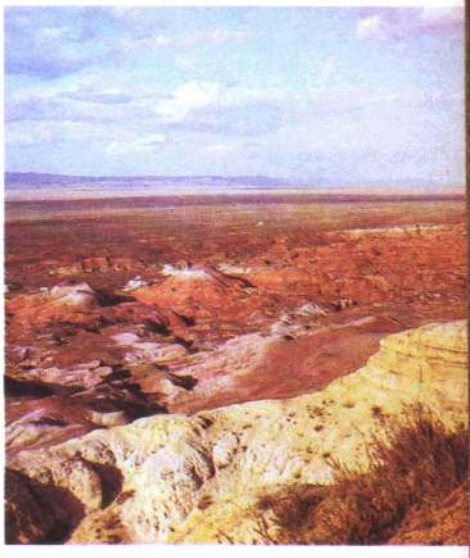
BUSTARD

This one is only a baby bustard, belonging to a very rare breed of bustard which is called the houbara. The houbara hatches her eggs in the hot, dry steppes, and for the poor chicks it's like roasting on a red-hot frying pan, with the sun blazing down from above, the fire-breathing wind scorching their sides, and nowhere to hide!

If Mother were there, she would at least throw her own shadow over the chicks. But she keeps away for fear of betraying the presence of her children to one of her many enemies—eagles, foxes and wolves. As for the chicks, even the desert cat and the polecat are dangerous enough.

There are few houbaras left even in the remotest steppes. In spite of their fast legs, powerful wings and keen sight, they make easy game for poachers. They rely mainly on their protective coloration, hoping that if they flatten themselves against the ground, they'll escape notice.



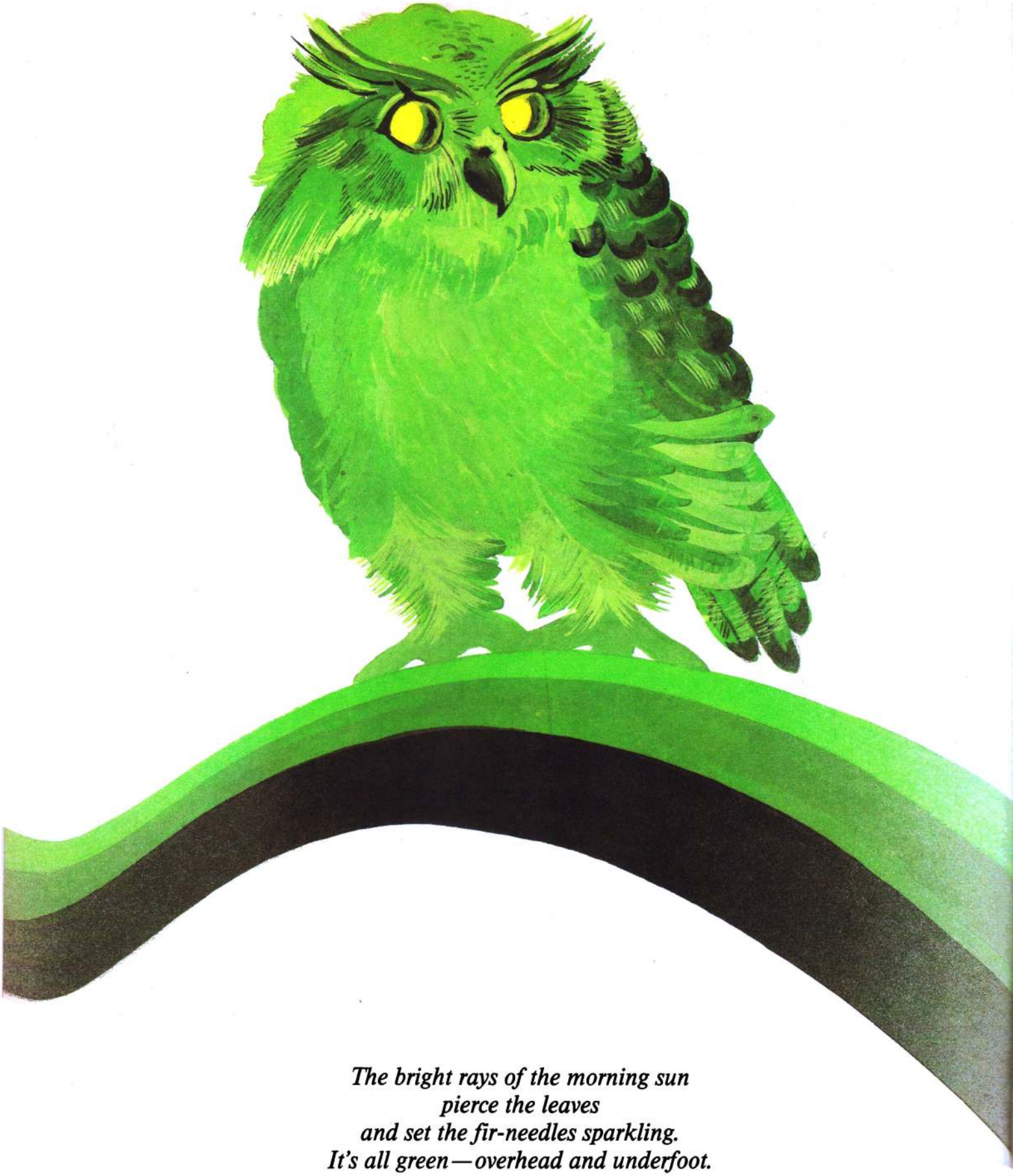


GECKO

The gecko wears a beauty of a shirt, covered all over with bright scales like buttons. And his trousers, too, are nice and fancy, adorned with white ruching and flounces. Clothes to be proud of! But nothing lasts forever, and when the shirt and trousers wear out, they have to be replaced with new ones.

Hiding deep in his hole where no curious eyes can see him, the gecko struggles with all his might to pull off his threadbare clothes, literally jumping out of his skin in the effort. Now, at last, he has shed the old stuff, and there, underneath, are his brand new clothes: a shirt with the scales on it shining like buttons, and trousers trimmed with white ruching and little flounces.

The discarded skin was his own, after all. Pity to throw it away. So he rolls it up with his front paws and stuffs it into his mouth. Put it to some use anyway. He eats up his old skin and licks his chops. It was old, of course, but edible just the same.



The bright rays of the morning sun
pierce the leaves
and set the fir-needles sparkling.
It's all green—overhead and underfoot.
The grass is of every imaginable shade ...

The valley is green and dewy. A river swirls among the boulders and the very look of the icy spray sends shivers down your back. The morning is chilly and dazzlingly clear. You take gulps of the mountain air and it's so cold that it makes your teeth ache.

The bright rays of the morning sun pierce the leaves and set the fir-needles sparkling. It's all green—overhead and underfoot. The grass is of every imaginable shade, from bluish poison-green to the softest apple-green. Even the dew trickling down from the branches looks green. Huge burdock leaves, shaped like donkey's ears, twitch slightly in the wind. Walking on the grass here is like wading knee-deep in green water. Forget-me-nots and buttercups make splashes of blue and yellow against the green grass.

From afar the white, yellow and pink sweetbrier bushes look like neat, round flower-beds. The barberry bushes are thickly sprinkled with yellow flowers from which the bees, the butterflies, and the beetles make barberry jam.

Hats of white fluff adorn the tall, slender poplars, the elegant firs are decorated with red cones, and the boulders are covered with an intricate pattern of lichens. The tallest of the firs casts a shadow on the glade which moves like a gigantic clock-hand, showing the slow-moving woodland time.

BABY PHEASANT

Twelve baby pheasants were hatched from the twelve eggs in the nest. They were as fluffy as dandelions, only each of the dandelions had a wee bill and two short legs. Very soon they started pecking something with their wee bills and running about on their short legs, and so quickly too! Too spry for their own good! That same day one of them got lost in the thick grass, and another was carried off by a wild cat. And although their mother did her best to guard and protect her brood, bravely dashing forward to confront the enemy or else pretending to be wounded and luring the hunter away, two more disappeared the next day: one snatched by a fox, and the other by a hawk.

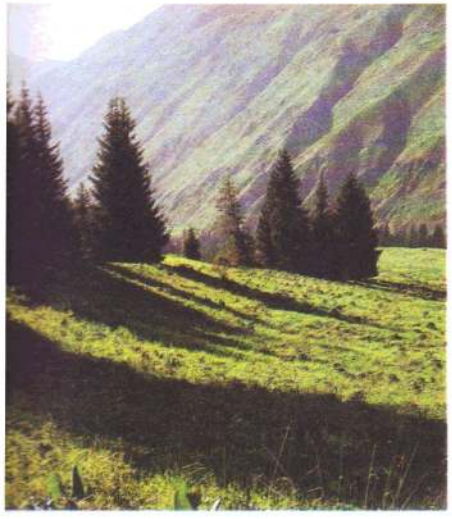
The surviving babies learnt to hide well. At the slightest sign of danger, they scattered at once to the nearest hummock, bush or thicket of grass, dropped down, hugged the ground and played dead. No one would ever think there was a living creature there!

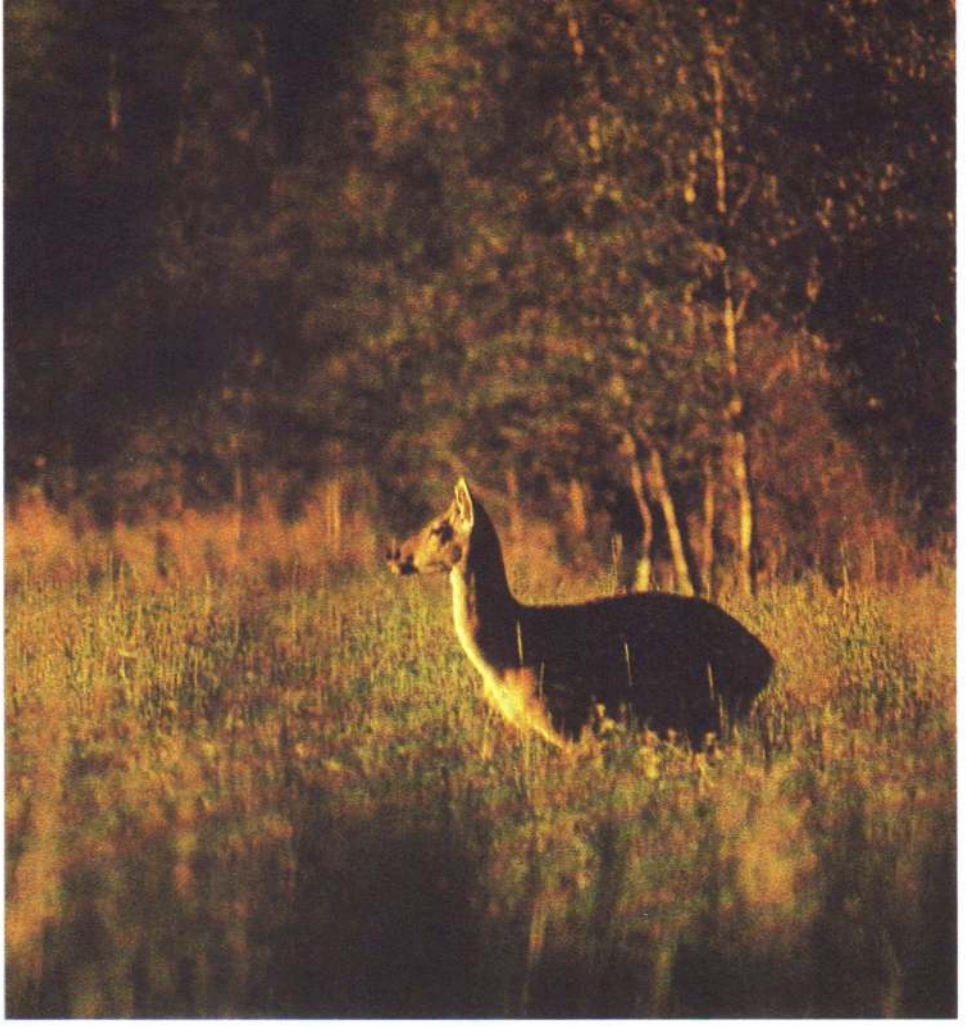
WAGTAIL

At first glance it's an ordinary wagtail, the quick, agile little bird we all know. But if you look closer you'll see that its head and neck are black, and that on its face it wears a white "mask". For the rest it's no different from the white wagtail, it's as swift, smart and lively, its song—a ringing patter—is as simple, it has the same undulating flight and a quick trot, it's as fond of resting on a stone or a tree stump and wagging its long tail.

And in spring the male likes to dance too, with the tail stuck up, the wings drooping, and the bill thrust forward. Going round and round in tiny steps and bowing.

From early spring till late autumn these wagtails stay close to rivers and lakes, and they are a joy to watch.



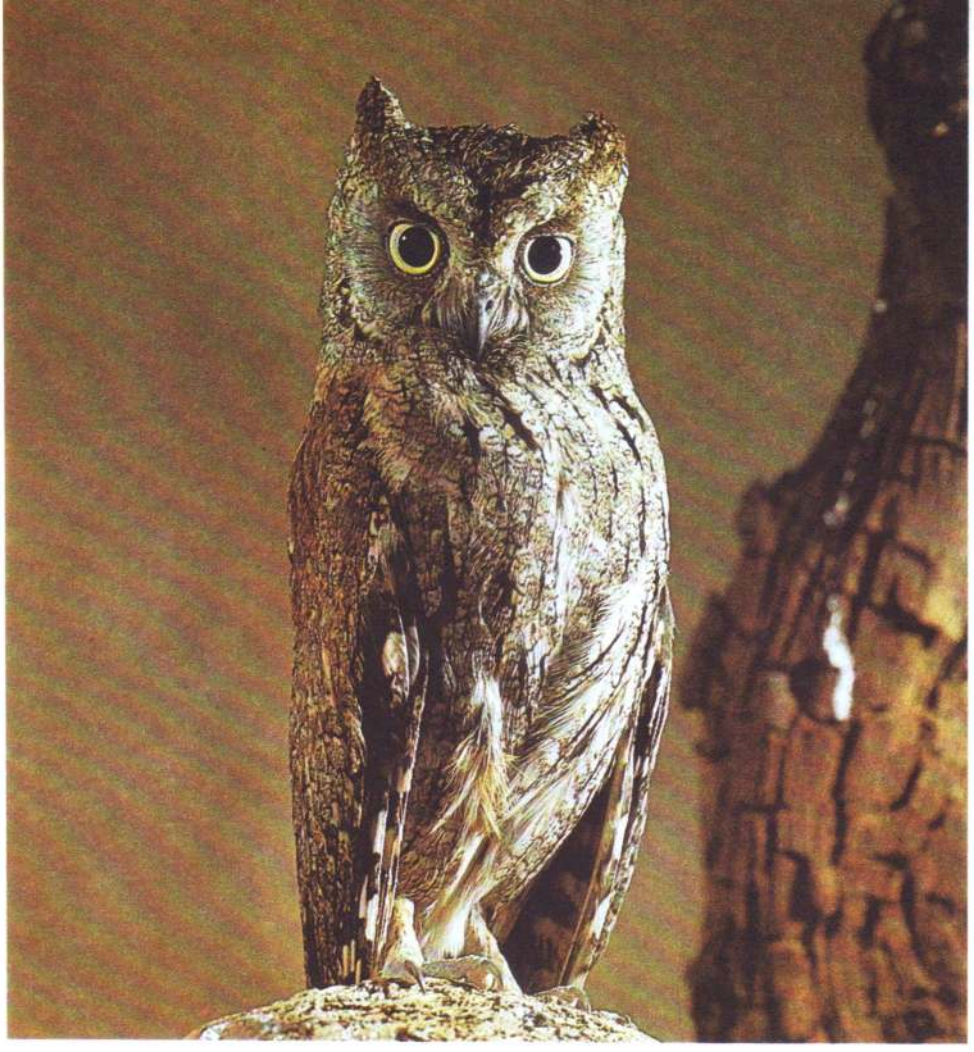


DEER

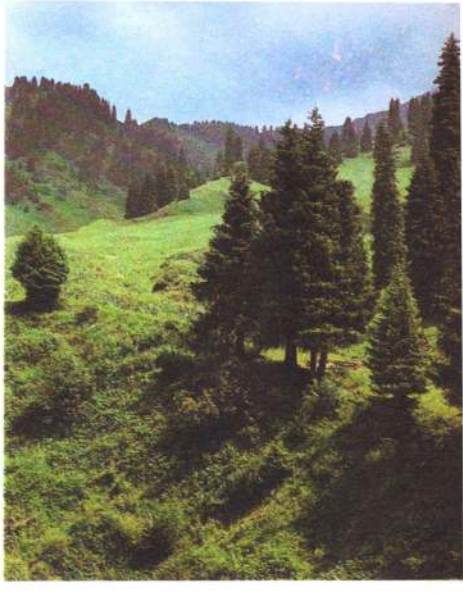
Deer come out of the forest into the open at sunrise and sunset, but getting a good look at them is not simple at all because they frighten so easily and are terribly wary. They keep lifting their heads, glancing about them, listening and sniffing all the time. They have very good eyes and ears, and an even better nose. And that is why they trust it more than their sight or hearing and always hold it before the wind, whether they are grazing or just lying down.

Deer are both cautious and curious. Sensing danger, they do not make a headlong dash for safety, but run for the nearest cover and see if they are being pursued or not. If they are, they will dash on, if not they will stay there and see who has frightened them.

The doe we managed to photograph belongs to the genus of deer called the Siberian stag.



SCOPS



The scops is the smallest owl we know, and besides being so small its colouring is so drab that it is very difficult to see a scops when it is sitting on a branch. It will stretch out, close its eyes, and become simply a dry twig or a notch in the bark of the tree. And it will sit like that all day, dozing. But when twilight falls, the scops will wake up at once, take a look around, listen for a bit and then fly off on its silent hunt for night moths and bugs.

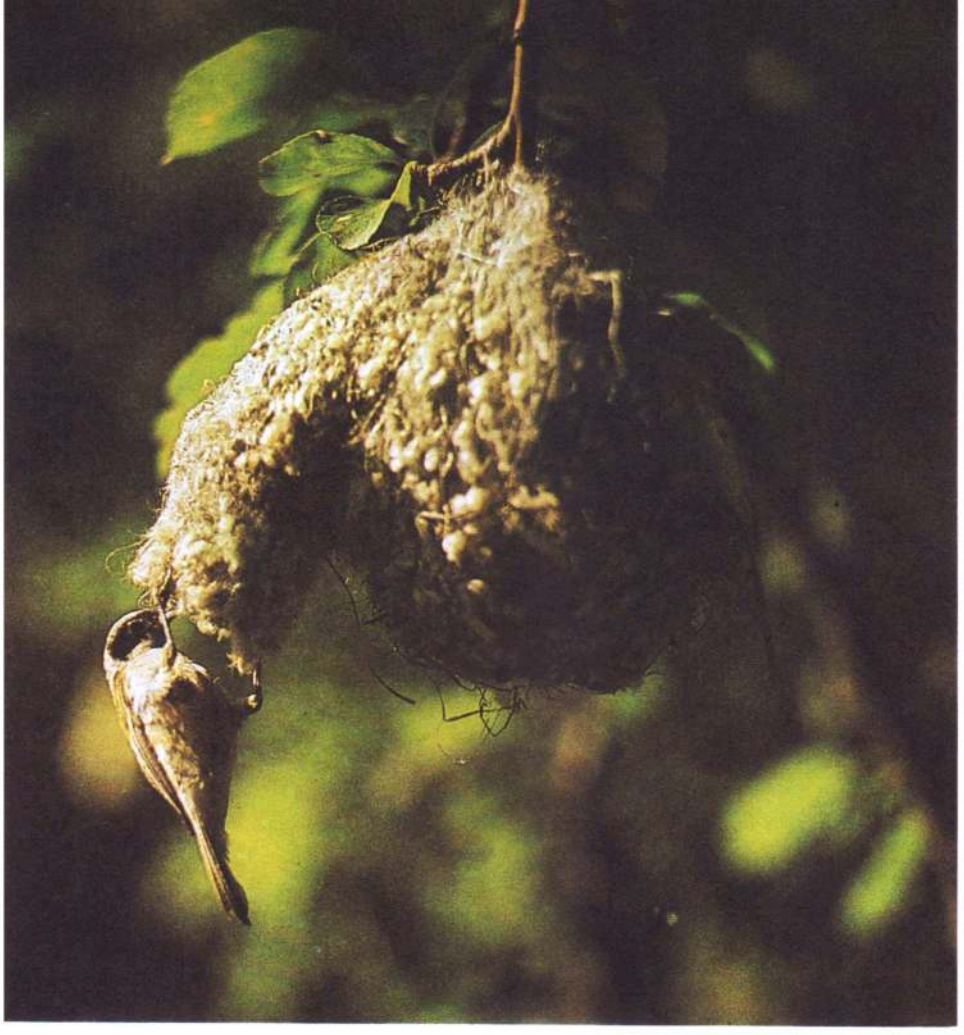
Between its forays it sits on a twig and sings. Naturally, it's nothing like the glorious singing of daytime birds, more like monotonous, plaintive cries: "Tiu ... tiu ... tiu ..." But, strange thing, you love it and want to hear more. Those cries, sounding in the darkness, lend a touch of mystery and fascination to the night.

BABY OWL

A baby owl was sitting on a tree stump in the shade, patiently waiting for darkness to fall when his mother would come and feed him. He is quite a big baby, but he has not learnt to do his own hunting yet.

Sitting on that stump all day is a boring business, and so he started staring about him, and saw me. I could tell by his look that he had not much sense yet but was very cocksure, and so I decided to teach him a lesson. I sat on my haunches, shook my head and spread out my hands. The owl looked at me, blinking hard and shuffling his feet, obviously welcoming the diversion. I wagged my left hand right in front of his nose to catch his attention, and very slowly and cautiously moved my right hand behind him. I waited a moment and suddenly grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

My, how angry he was that I had fooled him, how he ruffled his feathers, snapped his bill and tried to claw me! His eyes blazed with anger. That's how furious he was with me. But he only had himself to blame, he shouldn't be so cocksure!

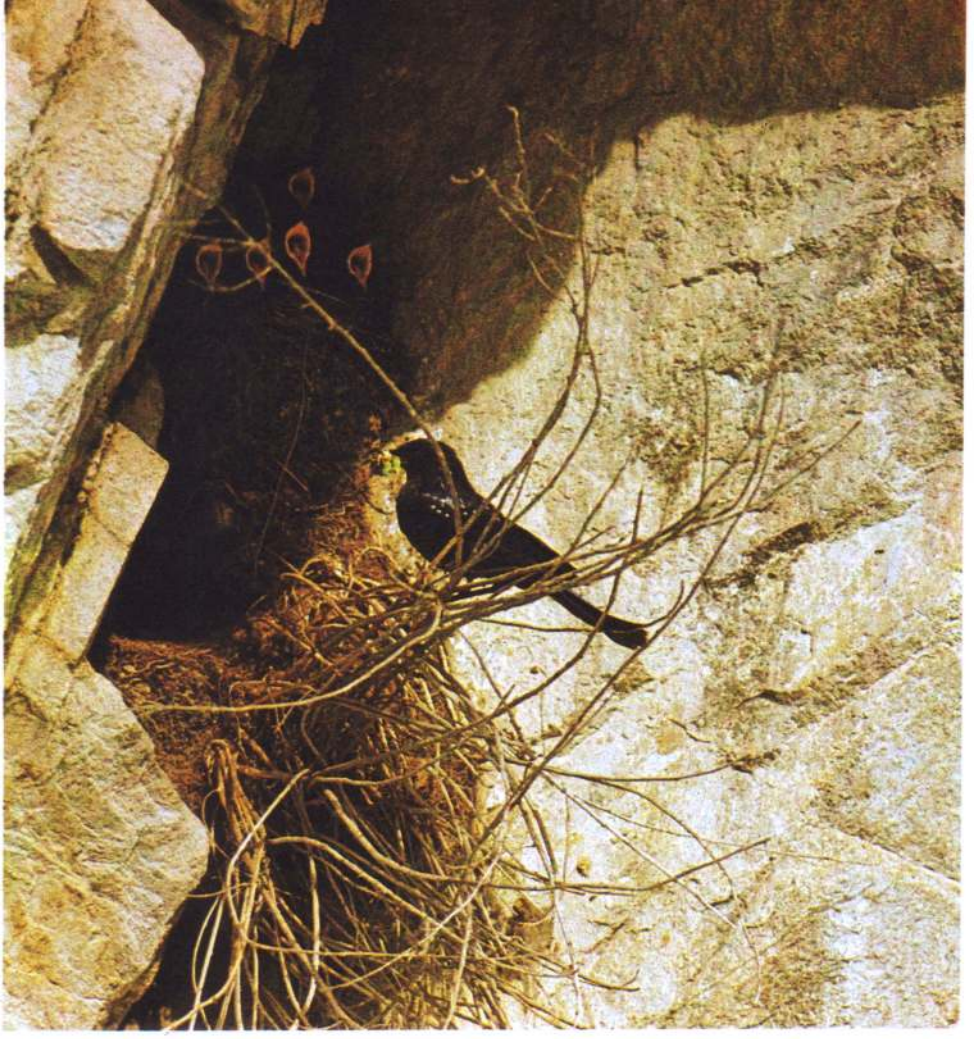


PENDULINE TIT

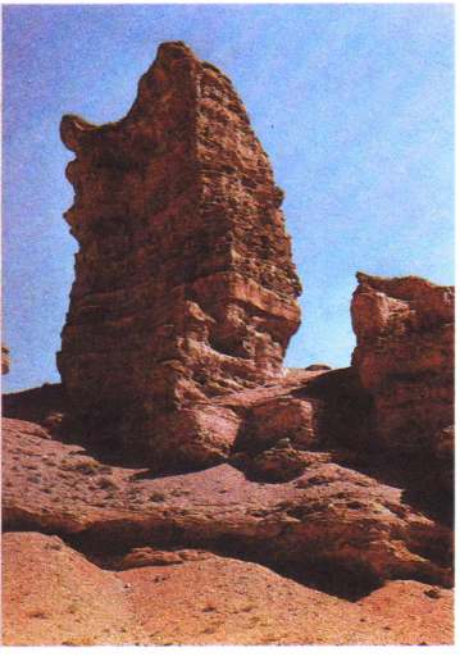
To think of all the different nests there are! The chiff-chaffs build little sheds, the thrushes' nests are bowl-shaped, the golden orioles have tiny cradles, the mountain nuthatch have a small clay pot, and the penduline tits—a knitted mitten.

They tie this mitten securely to the tip of the thinnest branch and though it does get thrashed about by the wind it is safely out of the reach of any marauders. There's a hole in the thumb of the mitten—that's the entrance.

There the mitten hangs from a branch, a safe, soft and warm nest, with a white edge round the opening to make finding it easy even in the dusk. In full flight the tits dive head first into their nest, never missing the opening. They make good, loving parents, they see that their nestlings are warm and happy, and bring them beakfuls of food.



DIPPER



From afar it looks black, and only close to or in the sun it turns out to be such a lovely blue that you cannot tear your eyes away. The dipper will perch on a stone in the middle of a roaring river, amid the foam and the spray, and the drops of water glisten on it like pearls. When it bends down and fans out its tail there is a flash of brilliant blue.

The river roars and seethes, but the dipper's shrill whistle easily pierces the noise.

Dippers love water. They come to the river to hunt, going bravely into the water to catch small fry and larva. Their nests they also build close to water, sometimes even behind a waterfall, slipping through a chink in the cascading curtain to bring food for their young.

BLACKBIRD

Let us recall all the thrushes we know: song thrushes, mistle thrushes, fieldfares with white eyebrows, white bellies, dark crops or white crops, and last but not least—the black thrush with a yellow bill, the finest singer among them.

... Evening. The sun slowly sinks behind the mountains, a hush falls on the world, shadows fill the gorges and stretch down the slopes, the air is fresh and unbelievably clear, so clear that you can see the smallest rock on the farthest peak. And in this silence the blackbird sings his song.

He whistles a note and waits to hear if there will be an echo. He whistles again, and listens to hear if another blackbird will respond. The very mountains seem to be calling to each other in tender, wistful voices. The blackbirds go on with their singing until it grows quite dark, and even then they continue for a little longer.

A sheet of blue water
stretches to beyond the horizon
or, rather,
rears up into the blue sky
like a blue wall.

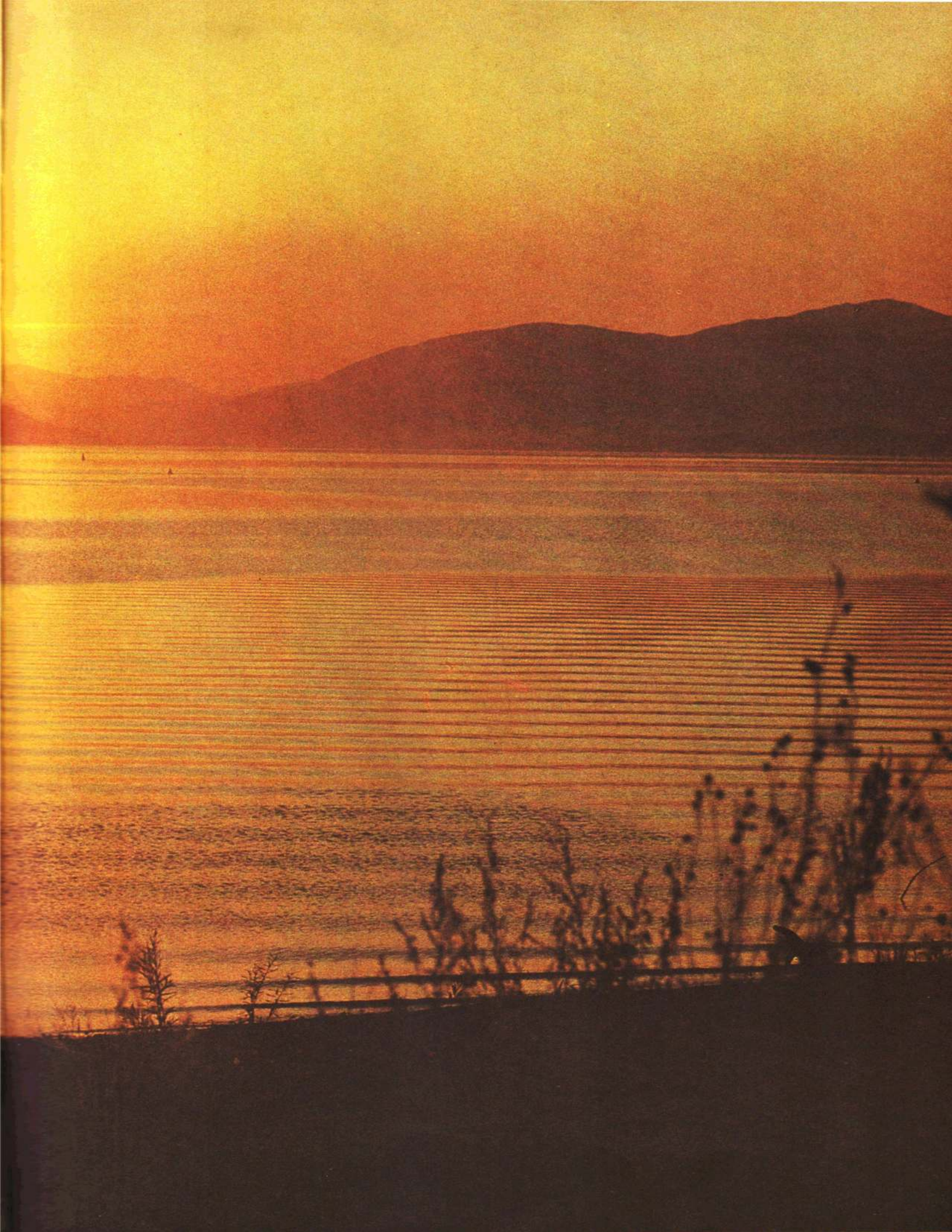
BLUE LAKE

The tiny dot on the very edge of the steppe is a yurt. Beyond the yurt is a drop, and beyond the drop is water. A sheet of blue water stretches to beyond the horizon or, rather, rears up into the blue sky like a blue wall. As the waves on this blue lake come rolling to the shore they whip up a white foam, and above it, like tatters of white spray, dart the gulls. Ruddy ducks doze on the reddish spit, while black-and-white sheldrakes splash about in the white foam near the black rocks with their coral-red bills flashing wetly in the sun.

The mighty waves roll lazily to the shore ... And above the water an eagle wheels slowly, close to the very sun.

You can wander about for hours, quite mindlessly, simply gazing at the water, the sky, and the shore. But then you discover that you have never felt so light-hearted and never has your mind worked so busily.

The wind shrieks on a thin note, the waves hiss and splash. The snags on the shore have been polished to a sheen by the water. The sand is wet and porous. And a great wall of blue water reaches to the very sky.



PELICANS

On land pelicans look awkward and clumsy, bow-legged, long-nosed, and altogether ungainly. But in water they look like ships from a fairy tale.

Their white breasts thrust forward, the pelicans move unhurriedly between the white-crested blue waves. They raise their wings high, perhaps for fear of getting them wet. Now they dip their enormous beaks into the water to catch fish. One of them has scooped up a large carp, tossed it up, opened wide its beak, caught the fish and swallowed it. And again it sails on like a white ship, its beak resting on its chest.

Pelicans rise heavily from the water with a noisy slapping of feet. But once up, they ascend easily and after circling for a while high up on the waves of the warm wind, they make for land to rest, doze a bit, and dry their plumage.

They spread out their wings flat, and lay their beaks down on their crop, which blows up like a balloon with the wind. When in flight, the pelicans dry and air their pouches in preparation for more fishing.

Pelicans are good-natured birds and always nest in large colonies on floats made of broken reeds. Their nests are so noisy that you can always locate them from afar. The hungry young nestlings raise such a row that it sounds as if a herd of cows has been stranded in the reeds. The parents feed their young with fish mash. The nests are safe from hostile invasion, guarded as they are by impassable thickets of reeds, swamp, and legions of mosquitoes.

SWALLOWTAIL

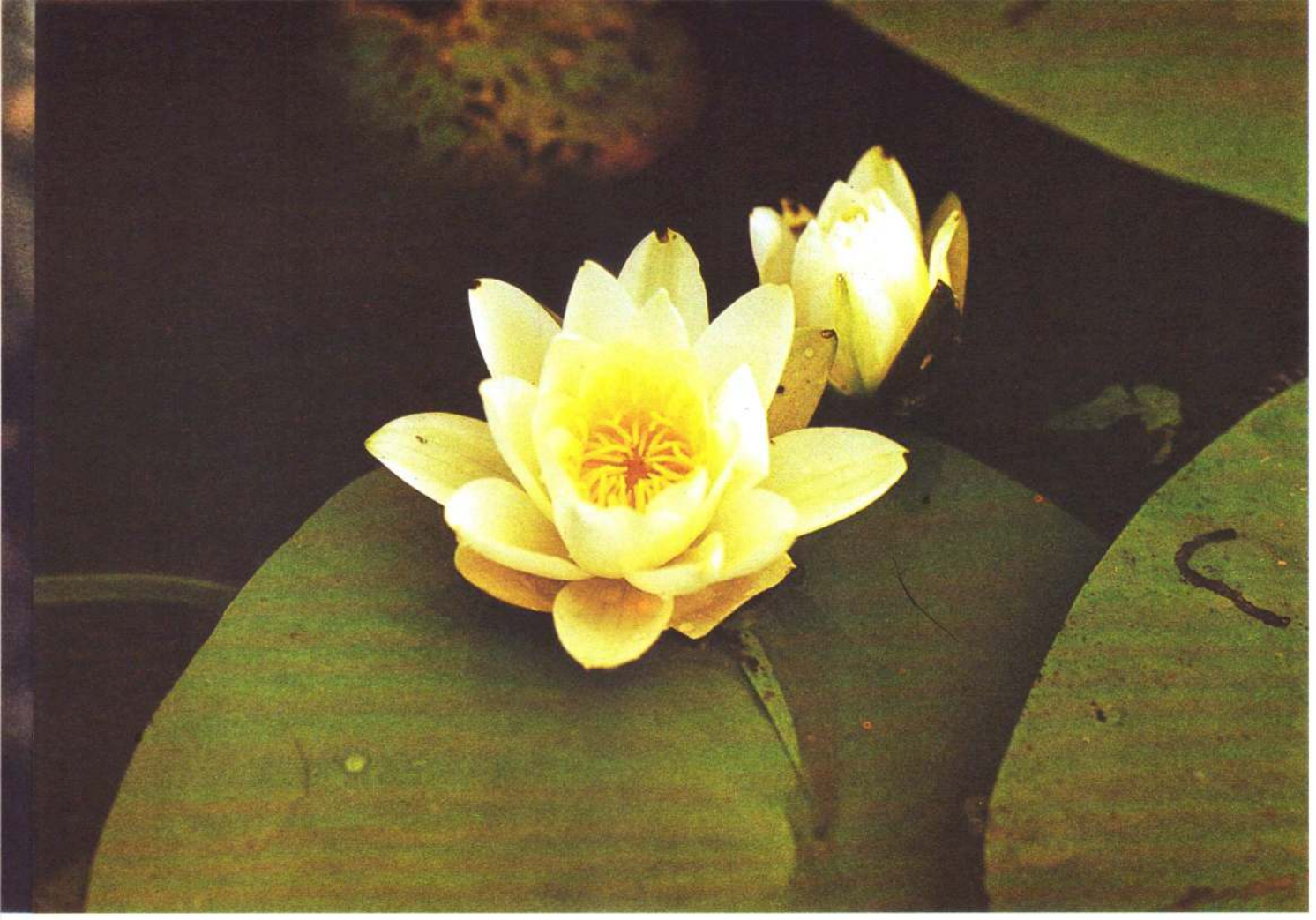
A beautiful butterfly, you can see for yourself. It is lovely on flowers, on the ground, and in flight. Alas, it is also beautiful when stuck on a pin in a butterfly collection. If it were only for a collection! There's some sense in collections, but these butterflies are also killed for their pretty wings to make various gewgaws and pictures, too, like mosaics. One picture takes hundreds or even thousands of wings and, naturally, the brightest and prettiest there are. These pictures fade very quickly and gather dust. But even when new and fresh they cannot rival the beauty of living butterflies flitting among the flowers.

PLOVER

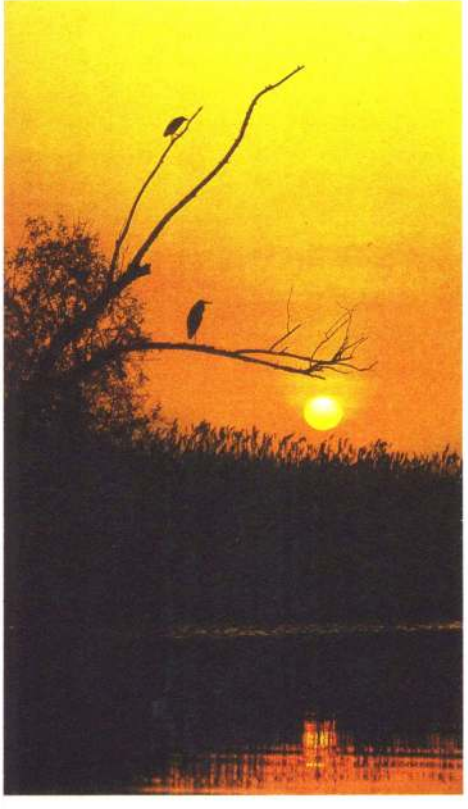
Plovers love water, and so marshes, damp meadows, and the banks of rivers and lakes are where they like to live best. But the Caspian plover for some reason prefers the dry steppe, and the driest spots there, too, the bald patches forever licked by the hot wind.

Their nests are on the bare ground, and the eggs in them are drifted over by dust, so that you wonder whether it's the mother or the hot dust that keeps them warm. Does the dust do the hatching perhaps?

The eggs are impossible to see, and the chicks even more so. They scatter and vanish from view. It's an open spot, not a hummock, not a bush anywhere near, and you know they are there somewhere, but you can stare your eyes out and never see one!



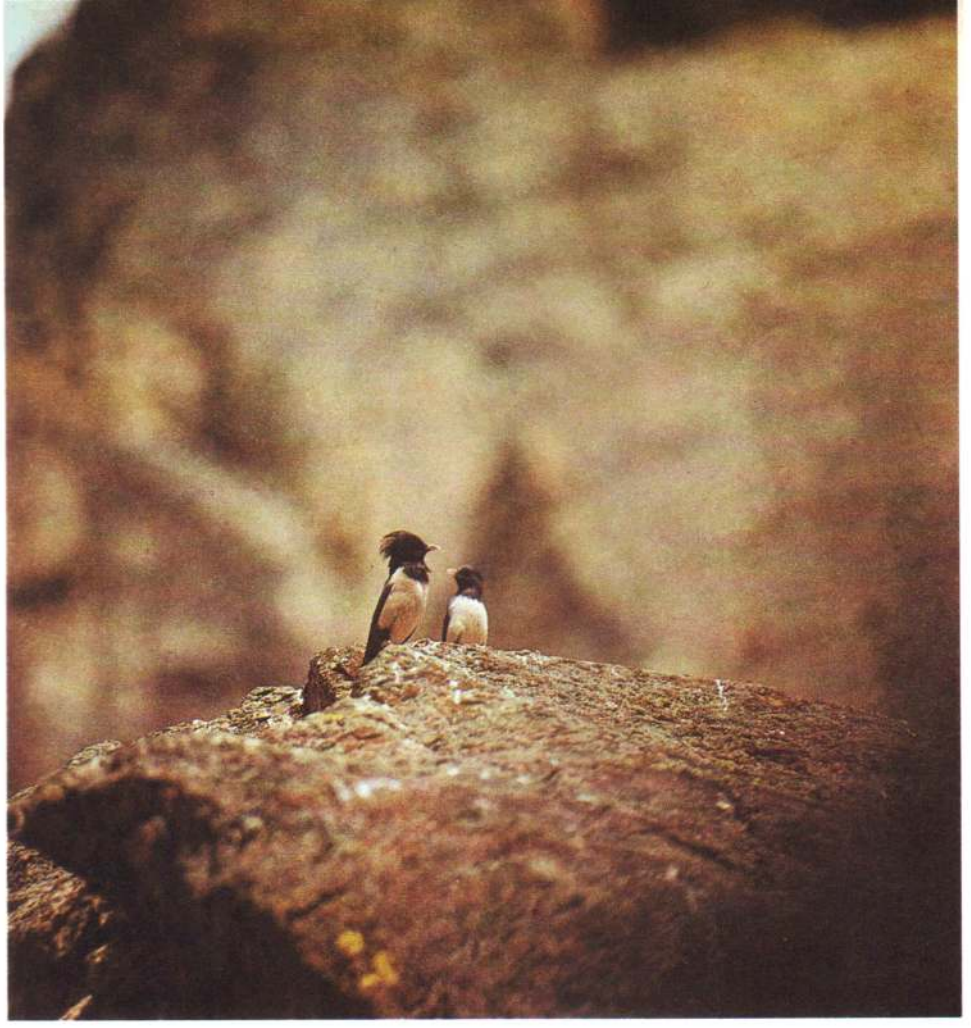
WATER LILIES



Of course you can pick a bunch of water lilies to put in a vase, but in an hour they will wilt. You can also weave a garland of water lilies, but then they will wither even sooner. Left where they are, they will gladden the eye all summer long.

They bask in the sun all day, but when evening comes they fold their waxen-white petals like fingers clenched round the golden-yellow stamens, and sink into the water. There they sleep till morning. They surface with the rising sun and once again open out their petals to let the sunlight shine on their stamens, united into a cup-like core.

We can admire the flowers while the seeds are ripening. We can also check our time by them, because water lilies open at exactly the same hour every morning. And for another thing, they forecast the weather, never opening if it is going to rain.

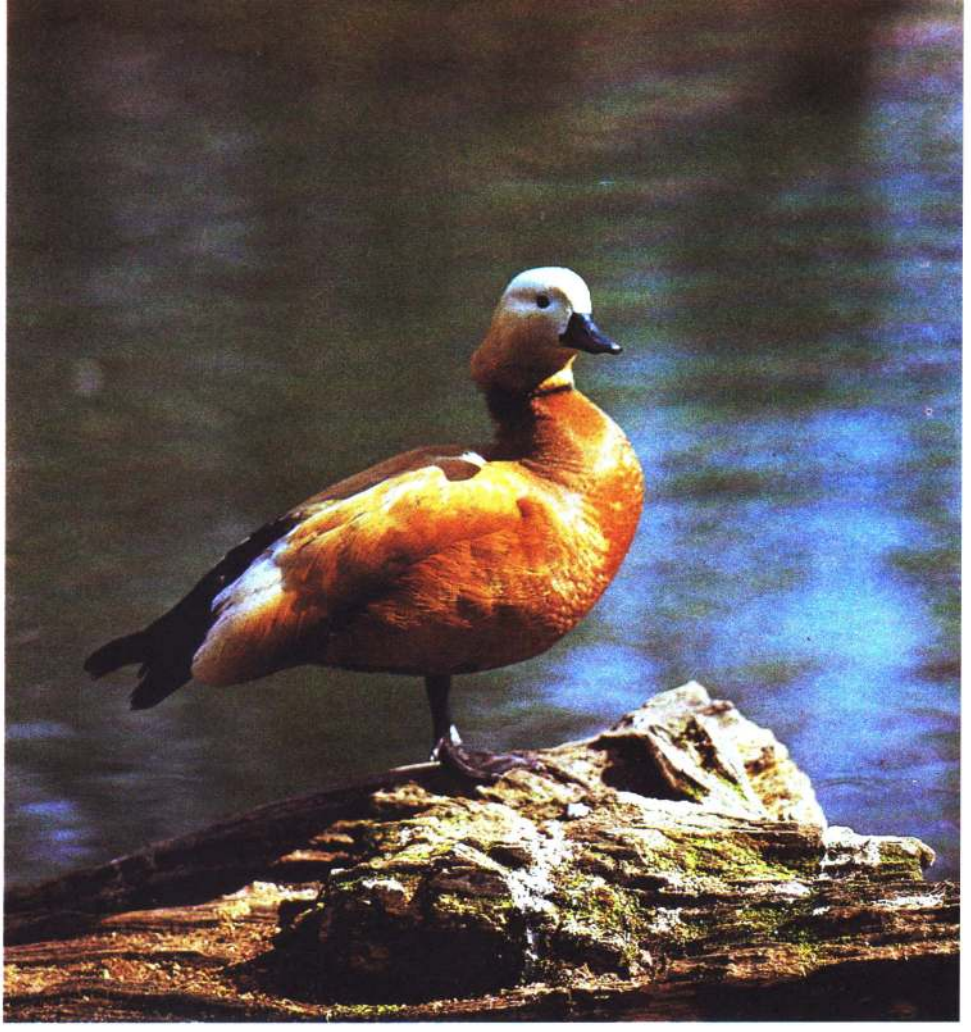


PINK STARLINGS

Starlings can be pink too. Here you are—a pink starling with a black tuft on its head and black wings.

Like the black ones, pink starlings are companionable birds. They never live alone and always nest in large gatherings in the crevices of rocks or piled-up stones. It's a regular colony, numbering dozens and hundreds of birds, chirping, singing or screaming as they squabble. You can watch them for hours and enjoy every minute of it. And you are sure to notice that each starling carries a grasshopper or a locust in its bill. A whole cluster sometimes. Locusts are their favourite food, and they are willing to fly far into the steppe to catch them.

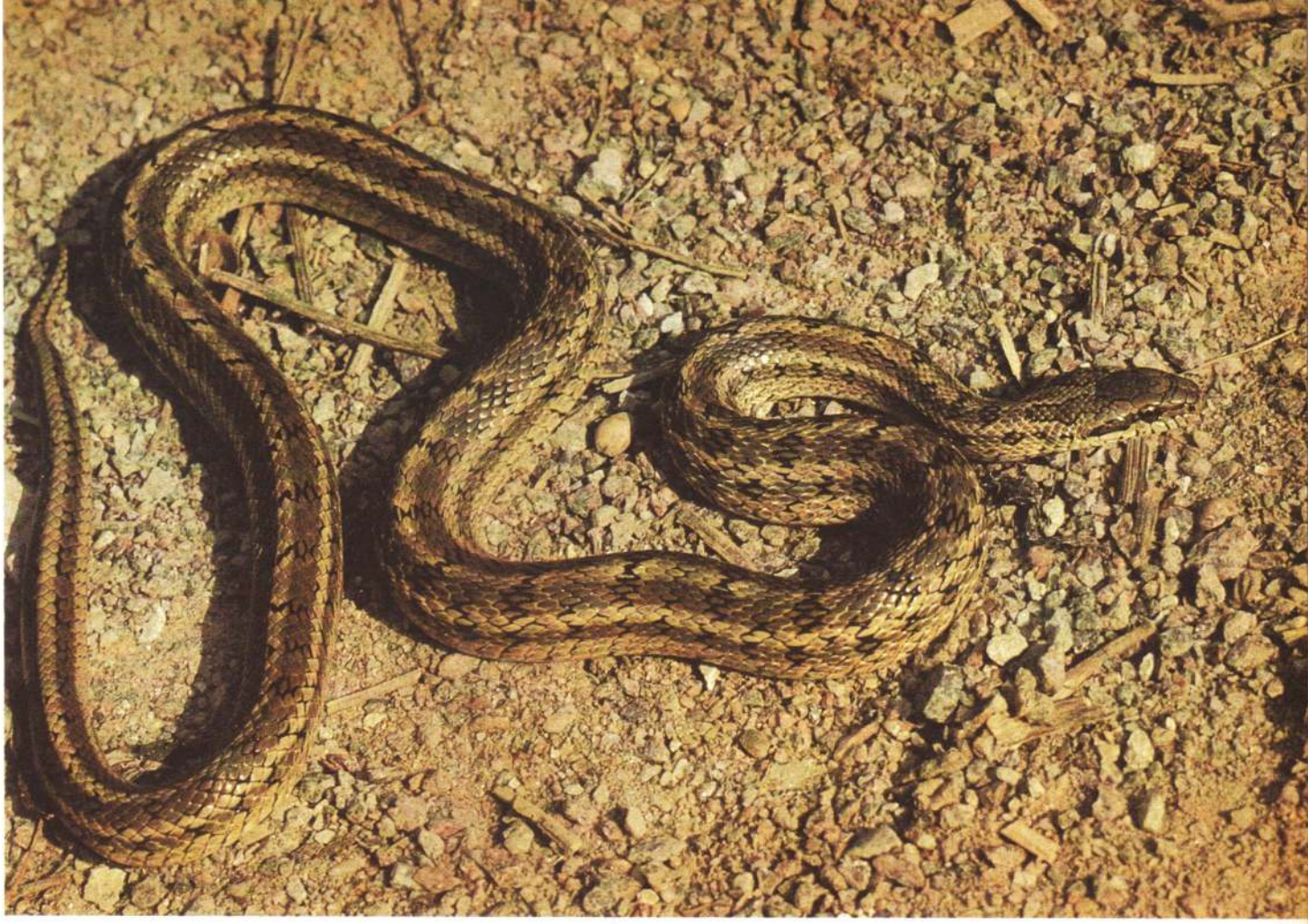
And people, grateful to them for devouring such quantities of these pests, even forgive the starlings for raiding their vineyards and orchards. And so they should. Aren't such beautiful and friendly birds worth a few cherries or a bunch of grapes? The more so since they pay for them with locusts.



RUDDY SHELDRAKES

Ruddies are the most extraordinary of ducks. Take just their colouring: it's so bright and conspicuous. Their cries sound more like the cackling of geese than the quacking of ducks. And as for their nests, they build them not on hummocks, not under a bush, but in small caves and burrows. And not in the marshes, as ducks are supposed to do, but in the bare steppe and even on high mountains. In the steppe they use the marmots' and the foxes' abandoned dens, or even an old, caved-in grave, and in the mountains they build their nests in crevices and small caves.

It's hard on the poor ducklings afterwards. They must either jump down from a rock, spreading out their still feeble wings like a parachute, or struggle out of a dark and narrow hole. And after that they have to foot it after their mother over mountains and dales all the way to water. The behaviour of these birds may seem strange, but they are ducks, after all. And like all aquatic birds they have bills to scoop duckweed with and webbed feet to swim. And water is one thing they cannot do without.



RAT SNAKE

This is not a poisonous snake, but snakes will be snakes, and an encounter with this one is not easily forgotten. You can happen upon a rat snake in a clump of bushes, among stones, and on rocks where it crawls to enjoy the hot sun and also to hunt. The rat snake hunts birds, small animals, lizards and grasshoppers, stealing up on them cleverly and snatching them up with its teeth. If the prey puts up too strong a resistance, the rat snake will wind itself round it and crush it to death.

Few people like snakes, whereas almost everybody loves birds. But take a good look at this specimen and you'll find it really handsome, beautifully coloured, graceful and not aggressive. Like birds, rat snakes often make their homes close to human dwellings where they count on catching mice in the cellars and sparrows in the garrets. They do it so quickly and stealthily that the people living in the house never guess what is going on. And it's a good thing they don't: better for their peace of mind and more convenient for the rat snake too.

From afar all mountains
look blue—tier upon tier,
ever higher and higher,
vaguer and vaguer,
bluer and bluer ...

BLUE MOUNTAINS

From afar all mountains look blue—tier upon tier, ever higher and higher, vaguer and vaguer, bluer and bluer, until they seem to float on air.

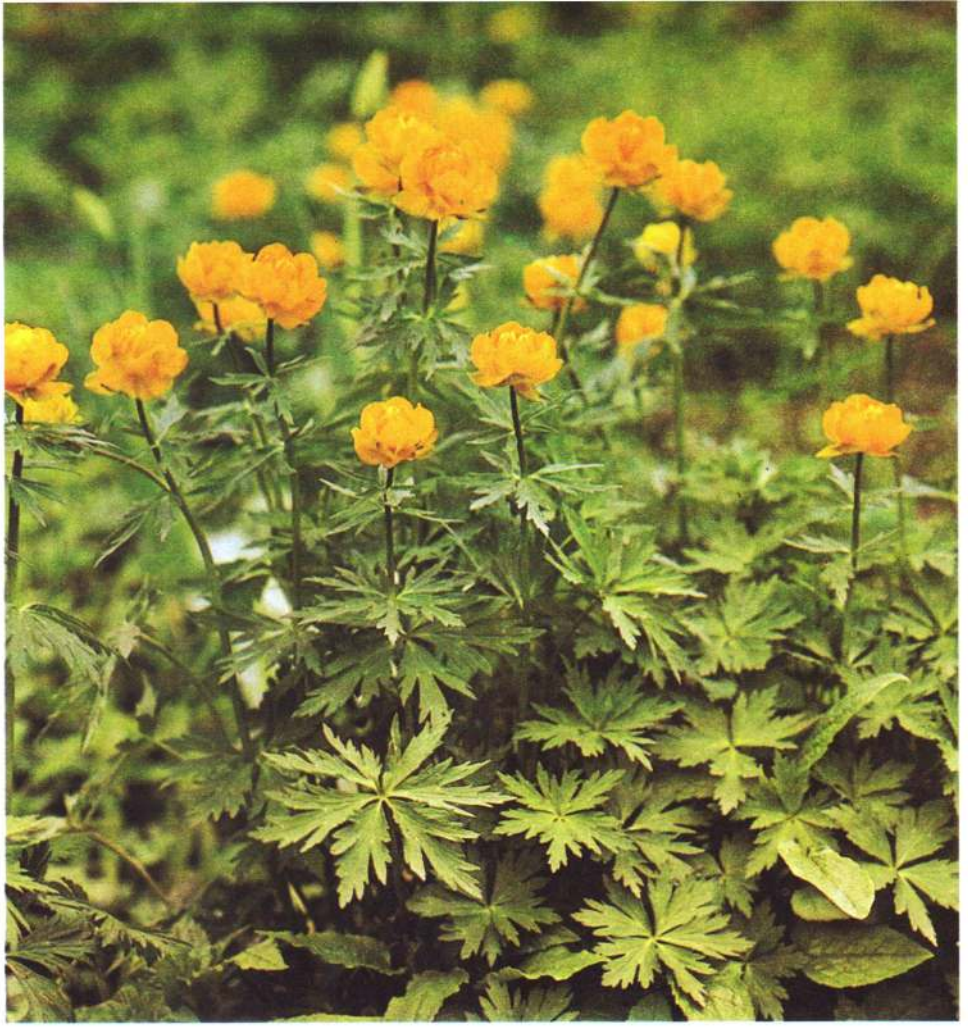
You trudge on and on, but the mountains come no nearer, and instead they rear ever higher before you. You are tired out, but the mountains seem as far away as before.

Here are the foothills at last. The mountains block out the sky and overhang the valley, and now you can see that they are not blue at all but different colours. Some are green, some are brown, and some are reddish. And no two are exactly alike in colour, shape or height.

Each mountain is a world apart, a world as vast as the whole earth. And the distance from the foothills to the top seems as enormous as that from the equator to the North Pole. And, similarly, going up a mountainside you may find deserts, steppes, meadows, coniferous or leaf-bearing forests, tundra, never-melting snow and ice.

Clouds and birds pass far beneath your feet when you are standing on the top of a mountain, or again waterfalls and rivers may roar overhead. You can walk under the rainbow as through an arch, you can actually soar in the clouds and even reach up to a star. All the seasons of the year are there before you.

The earth lies below in all its beauty. And in the distance you see more mountains, range upon range, ever higher and farther away, a paler and paler blue.



SIBERIAN GLOBE-FLOWERS

These small, bright orange flowers burn like tiny lanterns in the thick green grass. Hence their Russian name *zharki* from *zharkii* (hot).

When there is too much of something it usually loses some of its value and attraction, but not flowers. There can never be too many red poppies, yellow buttercups, blue forget-me-nots, white snowdrops or daisies. And these orange flowers in a glade will always make you stop and look, and you'll never look your fill!

You will remember them in winter, when Nature lies asleep under a blanket of snow, and you can't wait for summer to come when you will again see these tiny orange lanterns burning brightly in the new green grass.

MOUNTAIN GOATS

It is rarely quiet on steep mountainsides where stones are forever trickling down, rustling and bumping. Mountain dwellers say that it's the stones whispering among themselves. To be sure they have a lot to talk and grumble about: the water streaming down the slopes and always dislodging them, the winds wearing them away, the sun blazing down mercilessly in the daytime and the nights that are so freezingly cold!

Now, when mountain goats climb up a slope the stones do not whisper, they clatter for all they are worth. Their sharp hoofs start the crumbled sandstone rolling down, and at sunrise this clink-clink-clink has a wonderful sound, sweeter than music. It's funny, because after all it's just goats going up the slope with their wide-browed kiddies jumping at their heels.

They are wild goats, which, of course, makes all the difference. Wild goats in the wild mountains, going up a slope to the musical accompaniment of tumbling stones.

CHIPMUNK

Fancy that! A wild boar has robbed a chipmunk! Shame on that huge, ugly beast, ravishing the poor little chipmunk's stores. The boar smelt the storeroom through the ground, ripped up the turf with his tusks, dug open the hole with his snout, and devoured everything there was, champing and snorting like the pig he is. He cleaned up everything—cedar nuts, choice acorns, sunflower seeds, wheat grains, everything. He might have left something, if only a little.

The poor chipmunk had been storing up the food all autumn, finding the grains, selecting the best, carrying them home, sorting them and laying them down in order. He kept only the best, the ripest, and made sure that nothing would sprout, get damp and turn rancid. He slept through the winter and did not touch his stores, keeping them for early spring which is the hungriest time for forest dwellers. And here he has been robbed of everything!

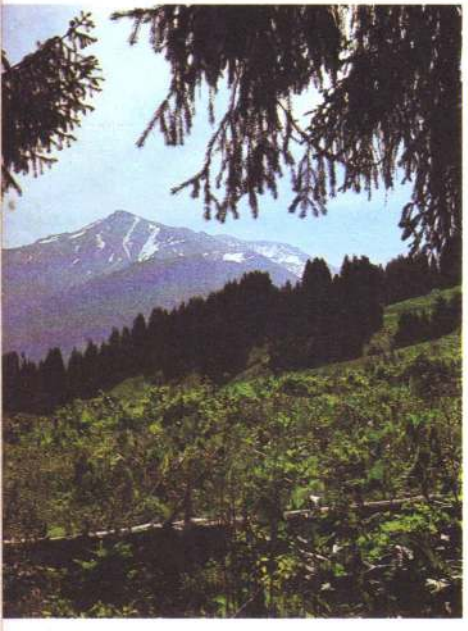
After gorging himself the boar plodded homeward, snorting with satisfaction. And the poor little chipmunk sat in the branches, forlornly whistling a sad little song.

SPOTTED DEER

They have been called flower-deer for their beauty, which proved almost the ruin of them when there was no law protecting them from hunters. They have now been re-settled all over the Soviet Union.

Sighting one is terribly exciting. A beautiful creature will suddenly show through the branches and foliage, instantly vanishing in the play of light and shadow. And if you happen to see a baby deer, you'll remember it for ever. You'll hear a light tapping, a rustle, and there in the glade you'll see a fawn standing on wide-spread legs with sunspots dancing on his russet-brown body. A lovely creature with full, large eyes, a damp, broad nose and huge velvet ears. In truth he looks like a beautiful flower amid the green grass!

CHECHEVITSA



This bird, a crimson grosbeak, is called in Russian *chechevitsa*, the word, meaning "lentil", being used in imitation of its cry. It comes to Russia for only a short stay of no more than two months to hatch the young, which are grayish-green in colour, while the plumage of the adult male is predominantly crimson.

GREY-HEN

This wood hen is very much like an ordinary hen except that she is so wary and takes fright so easily. Few people have succeeded in getting a close look at a grey-hen because in the usual way she tries to keep out of sight. But once she starts brooding you can come and stand right next to her nest and she won't move a feather! She'll just tense herself and not even blink, trusting in her protective colouration.

Sometimes she may even allow you to touch and stroke her. Only you should not do it. They may be hens, but they are wild, not domesticated birds, and your touch might give the bird such a fright that she'll abandon her eggs. And you'll be guilty of depriving the woods of a dozen lovely, fluffy chicks.

SHIELD-SNOUTED PIT VIPER

When twilight falls in the mountains these snakes crawl out of their holes for their nightly hunting. Even in broad daylight you can hardly make them out between the stones, and in the dusk you cannot see them at all. But beware of the smallest rustle because they are the closest relative of the dread rattlesnake. And though their poison is not so deadly, their bite is very dangerous indeed.

Like the rattlesnake this one also has a deep depression (pit) on each side of the snout between eye and nostril, which enables it to sense the living warmth of its victim in the dark. Like the rattlesnake again, when angered it shakes its tail and if it had a rattle on the tip it would make the same sound.

They do not attack people just like that, and try to crawl away the moment they hear footsteps. But, like all poisonous snakes, they are not too quick and agile, so when wandering in the mountains in the twilight mind you look under your feet!

BEAR

A forest simply must have bears living in it, otherwise it is not a real forest somehow, not exciting enough.

Here is a bear now, coming out from the thickets to nibble grass in the glade, rip up the turf, strip the wind-fallen branches, and overturn some stones.

By stripping the wind-fallen branches he can get at the ants and larva under the bark, and when he overturns the stones he can lick off the worms and bugs stuck to the damp underside. Using his huge paw as a rake he rips the turf off the holes of field mice. Grass he does not like much, and as he nibbles it he shakes his head, pushes out his lips and spits.

All his worries concern food. That's why he is so fat and his thick fur has such a healthy sheen. That's why he is so strong too. In the forest he is not afraid of anything or anyone, only the smell of man. And that's why he keeps sniffing all the time. The moment he catches a whiff of that hateful smell, he turns and runs away.

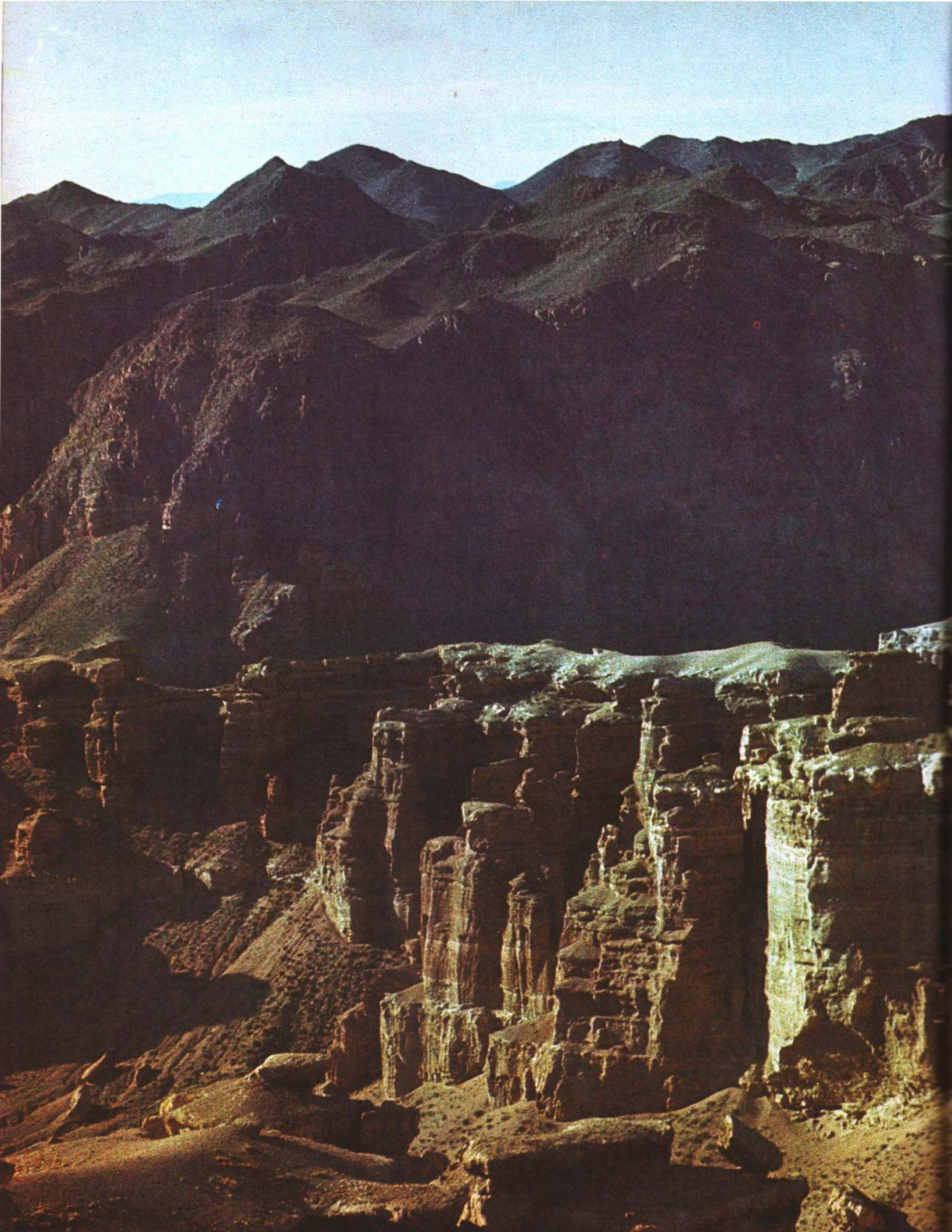
Long, long ago
the earth here cracked open
and a reddish-mauve canyon was formed.
A glance down sets your head whirling.

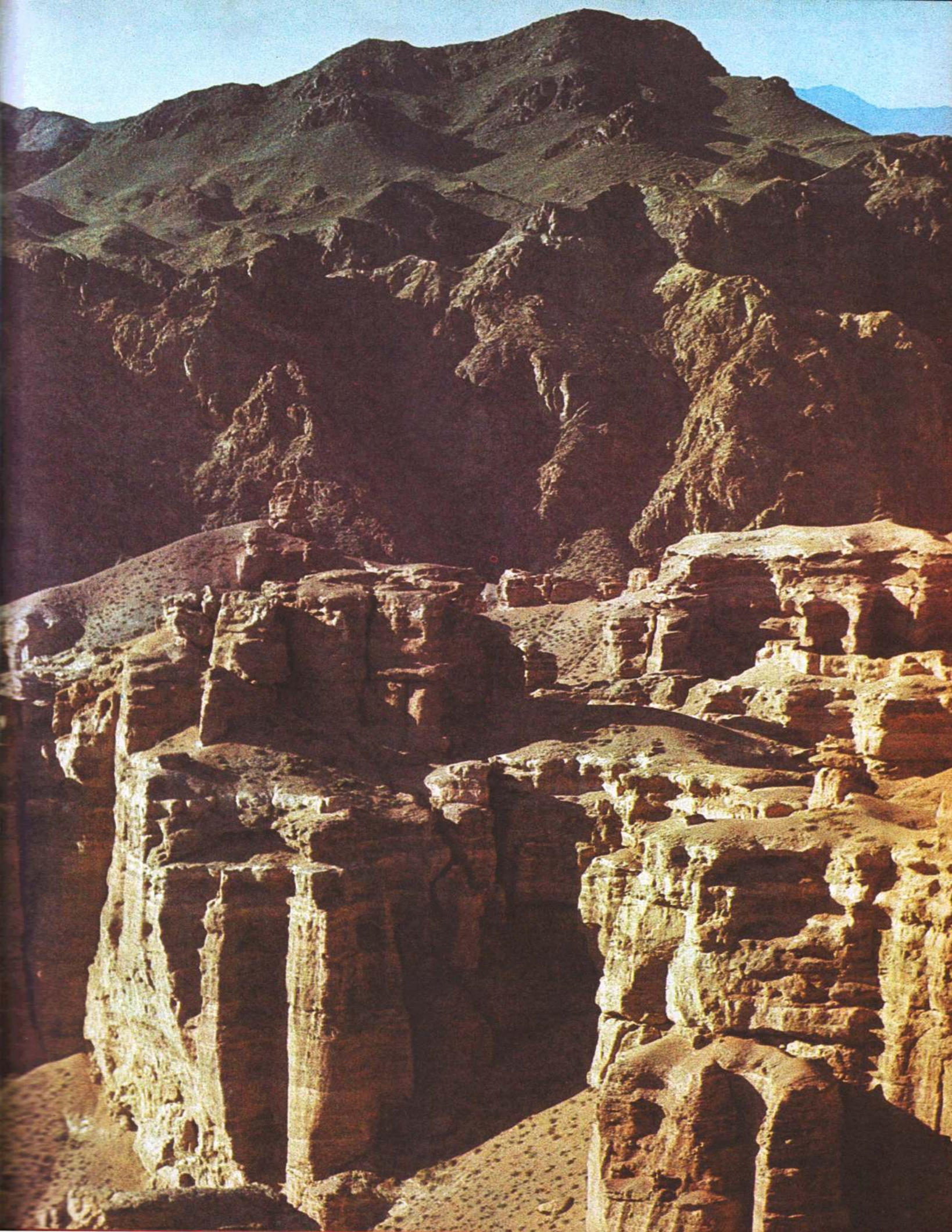
Long, long ago the earth here cracked open and a reddish-mauve canyon was formed. A glance down sets your head whirling. Once, a river must have wound its way along the floor of this canyon, but now the dry bed is like an old, abandoned road, strewn with sand and gravel.

Walking along it you fancy that you are amid the ruins of an ancient city and that the rocks lining it are really the remains of mansions, temples, fortresses with towers and gun-ports, arches and bridges over moats, great castles with turrets and spires, domes of churches and mosques, and skeletons of dwelling houses with caved-in roofs, gaping holes for doors and windows, and broken staircases. And you seem to hear muffled voices, creaking carts, clattering hooves, jingling spurs and swords ... And with your heart in your mouth you wait for something to happen ...

But there's no one there. The canyon is desolate, hot and silent. The burning sun scorches the walls with a mauve fire and fills it with a parching sultriness. And the whole of that enchanted mauve city with its castles and arches seems to waver in the heat like a mirage.

MAUVE CANYON





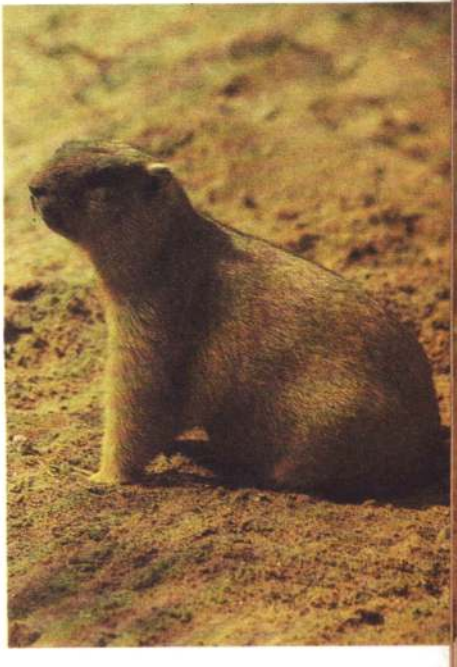
ROCK PARTRIDGE

It's been called a rock partridge because it lives on rocks and screes, while the Russians call it a "Keglick" for its cry: "Keg-lick, keg-lick!", and also a mountain hen. Rock partridges cluck in the evening before going to sleep and at sunrise, and when they do all the mountain slopes and rocks seem to be clucking together and it sounds like a wild hen-coop or something. But there's no sight of the birds themselves. You can only see them in flight or on the run. They fly down very low over the ground, as though rolling down the slope on their tummies, but the way up they always make at a run and look like fat little bottles on red feet. As they run up there's a faint tinkling sound made by the tumbling of the small stones which they dislodge with their claws.

It is quite impossible to make out a rock partridge when it lies low, and not just for us, people, but also for eagles and hawks.

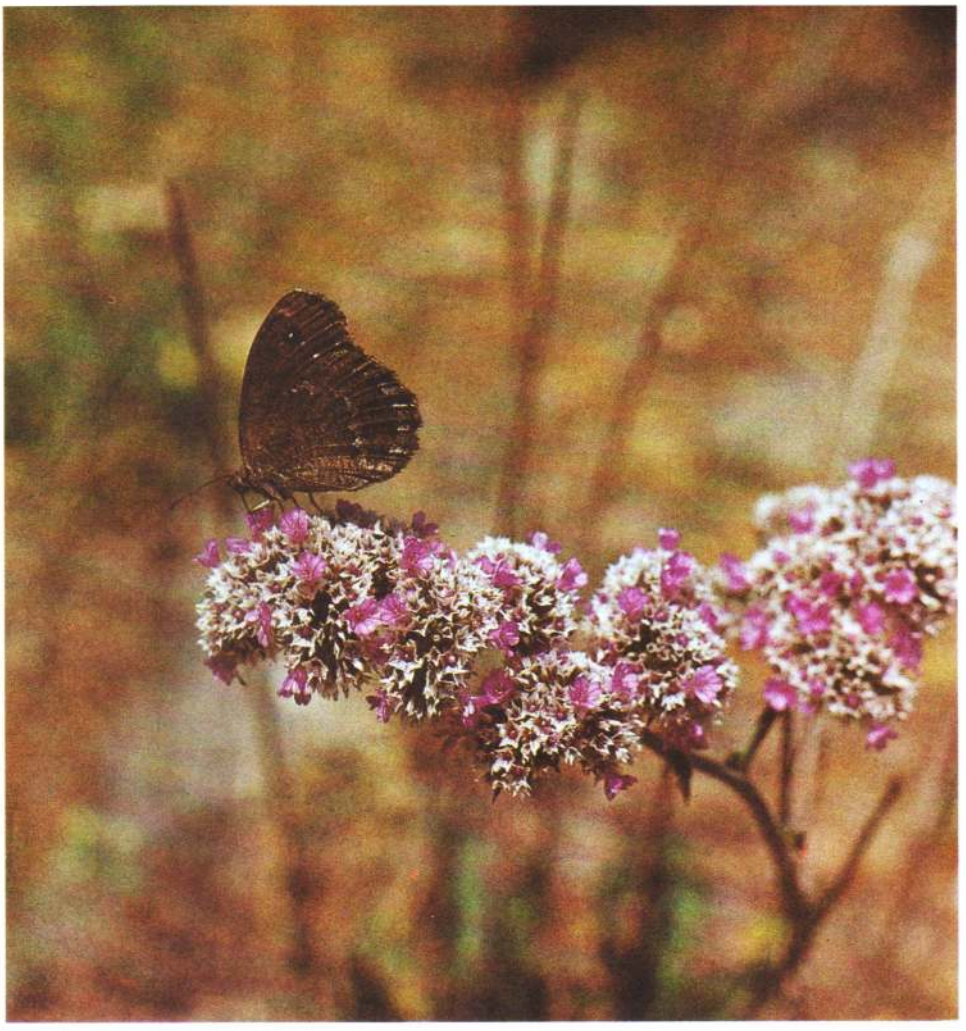
The screes would seem dead without the rock partridges who, in their turn, could not live without these rocks and stones.

MARMOT



If you hear a shrill sound like a loud whistle or a piercing squeal coming from the rocks, you may be sure that some marmots have crawled out of their burrows to sun themselves. They sit upright and survey the world about them, looking like round little hayricks set out to dry.

After sitting like that for a while, staring about them and sniffing the wind, they sprawl on their tummies and now they look like plush doormats spread on the stones. They yawn, screw up their eyes against the sun, and doze off. Butterflies flit over the prickly hawthorn bushes, nuthatches cry in ringing voices on the rocks, a rock partridge clucks amid the stones, gusts of wind tousle the sweetbriers, ripping off their yellow petals, but the marmots do not turn a hair, and sleep on, uncaring.



FLOWERS AND BUTTERFLIES

Where flowers grow there will be butterflies, and where butterflies flit there must be flowers. The two are inseparable, they cannot do without each other. Butterflies pollinate flowers, and flowers give them sweet nectar to drink. If butterflies may be called flitting flowers, then flowers may be likened to slumbering butterflies.

Dry gullies do not abound in flowers, and so each one there catches the eye, each one is beautiful and wonderful in its own way. One will be so prickly that you dare not touch it, another will be so bright that it dazzles you. And some will be so colourless that you will overlook them altogether at first. There will be strange poppies of a golden-yellow and not the usual red colour, daisies with no white petals and only the yellow button heart, and immortelles covered with tiny lilac blooms.

Flowers have each their own special fragrance: honey sweet, bitter as wormwood, sourish as vinegar, or biting like pepper. Guided by these smells, the graceful butterflies, the stout beetles and the shaggy bumble-bees hasten to the flowers of their choosing.

It is dry and hot in the gully with never a drop of dew. Only inside the flowers there is a little moisture. Butterflies cannot afford to be choosy now: every flower counts, no matter how tiny and plain. Nothing could be smaller than an immortelle with hardly enough nectar in each to wet the proboscis, but a drop here and a drop there keep the butterfly fed and alive.

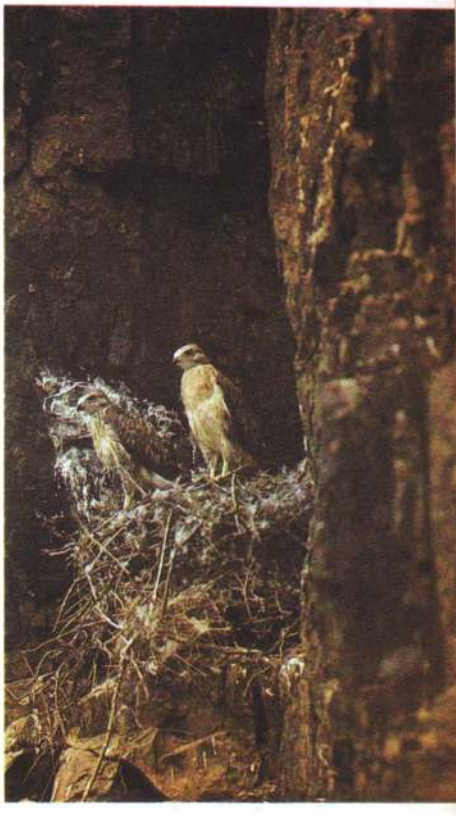
GOLDEN EAGLE

Eagles are not often seen even in the mountains, for they have become rare. And mountains with not an eagle in sight are as desolate as a sea with no seagulls flying above, or a steppe with no skylarks singing their songs.

When an eagle is out hunting it is truly a breathtaking spectacle. As he soars above the mountain range, all living things lie low. And as his huge shadow glides down the slope, the small mountain creatures shut their eyes in fright.

The eagle sails on his widespread wings, slowly turning his head right and left, and the wind whistles in his feathers.

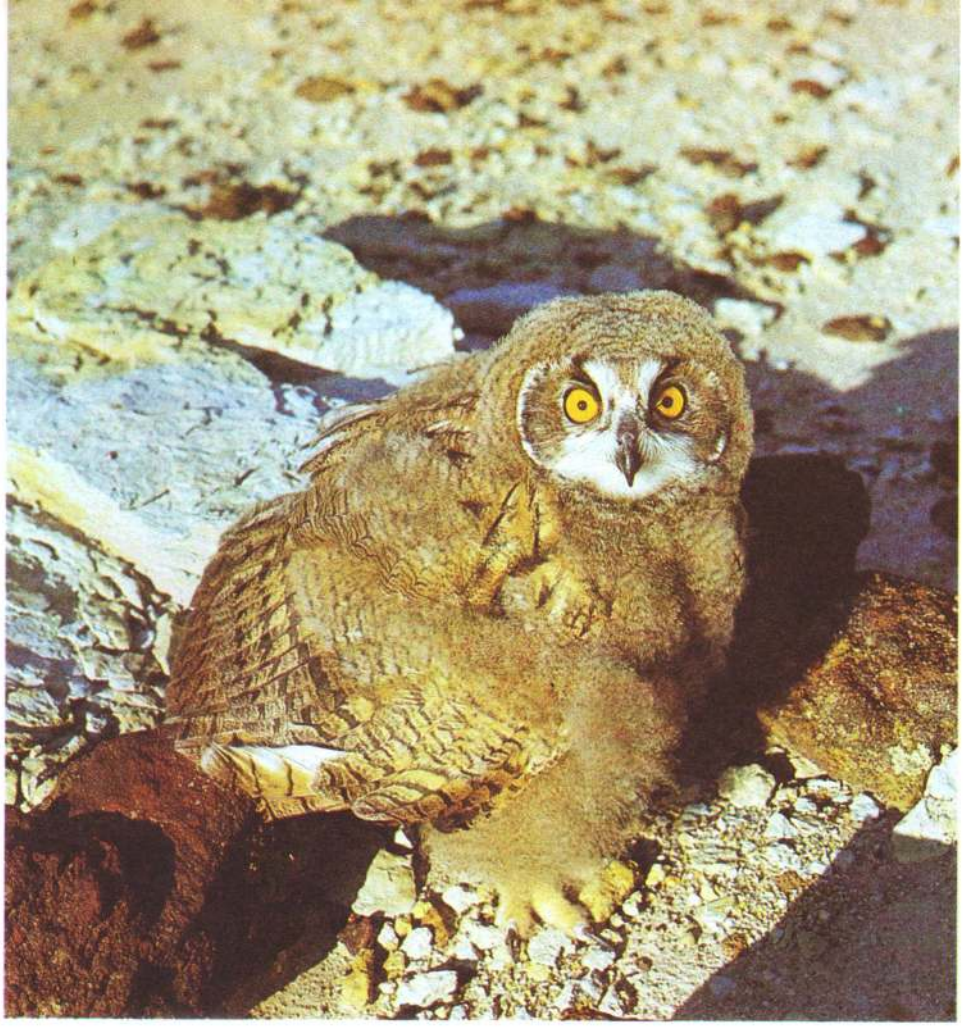
BABY EAGLES



There are three little brothers in the nest, they are triplets but not the same age to the minute because the mother, the steppe eagle, lays her eggs at large intervals and sits down to hatch the first one she has laid.

The first few days the baby eagles lie in a heap in the nest and look like fluffy chicks, not eagles at all. But when they stand up on their legs, having changed their fluff for feathers and turned brown, they look like real birds of prey. And they will remain standing in the nest like that for another six weeks or so.

The eaglets get bored standing or lying in the nest all the time, waiting for their parents to bring them something nice to eat, and so they stare about them at the rocks where they are to spend their lives, or else they pick at the feathers under their wings, learning to be neat and clean, or again they jump up and flutter their wings, doing their daily dozen to strengthen their muscles. Everything will come in useful in later life. The day will come when they will leave the nest, soar into the clouds on great, powerful wings, and see the vast world where they are to live thereafter.



EAGLE-OWL

At night you can hear the eagle-owls calling out to one another in the rocks where they probably have their retreat. Not a bad place at all, considering that hares, rock partridges, pigeons and starlings are plentiful there.

In the daytime I found the robbers' den: a cave in the face of the mountain. The sun, filtering in through the cracks, revealed a red rock inside the cave, and seated on it, as on a throne, was a slumbering eagle-owl. He started on hearing me, popped his eyes out at me, snorted, snapped his beak, and shot out of the cave like a furious cat.

At the foot of the throne lay lumps of undigested food. Ha, now I would find out for certain whom the villain has killed, I thought. But I shouldn't have called him names. In those lumps of food I did not find a single feather, not a rock partridge's, not a pigeon's, not a starling's. Only bones and fur belonging to such pests as field mice, hamsters and gophers.

Perhaps eagle-owls are not such villains after all, even though they look so sinister and hoot so horribly, especially in the dead of night.

TOLAI HARE

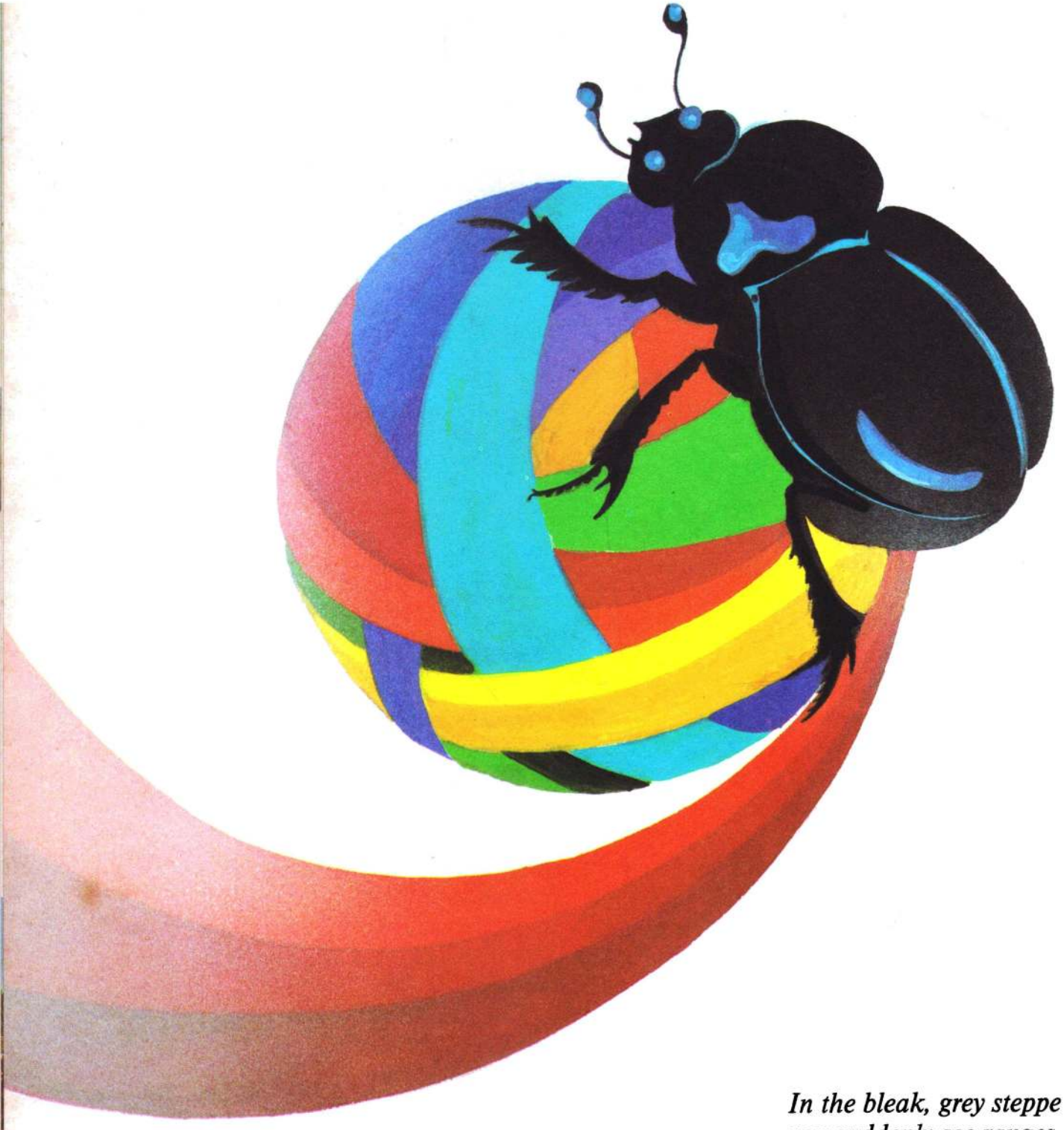
I saw a tolai hare sleeping in the cool shade under a bush with his ears laid back, his plump chin resting on his paws, and his eyes with the curly, long eyelashes closed in deep slumber.

He had slept through my approach. I could touch him with a foot, and as I stood right beside him I did not know what to do next. Suddenly he twitched his whiskers, wrinkled his nose up and down in a very funny way, slowly raised his lids, and his eyes all but popped out. His beautiful eyes, nut-brown with a gold spark, widened with deathly fear, swelling to the size of an owl's.

I felt so sorry for him that I simply stood there without breathing or blinking my eyes. And all at once he relaxed, lay down on the ground, wiggled for a moment, and went back to sleep. Because I was standing so still he mistook me for a tree stump. And no one in his right mind can be afraid of a tree stump, not even a hare.

Slowly, step by step, I backed away.

Won't he be surprised when he opens his eyes? Where has that tree stump gone? He must have dreamed the whole thing.



In the bleak, grey steppe
you suddenly see ranges
of tall hills,
and fiery-red ones at that!

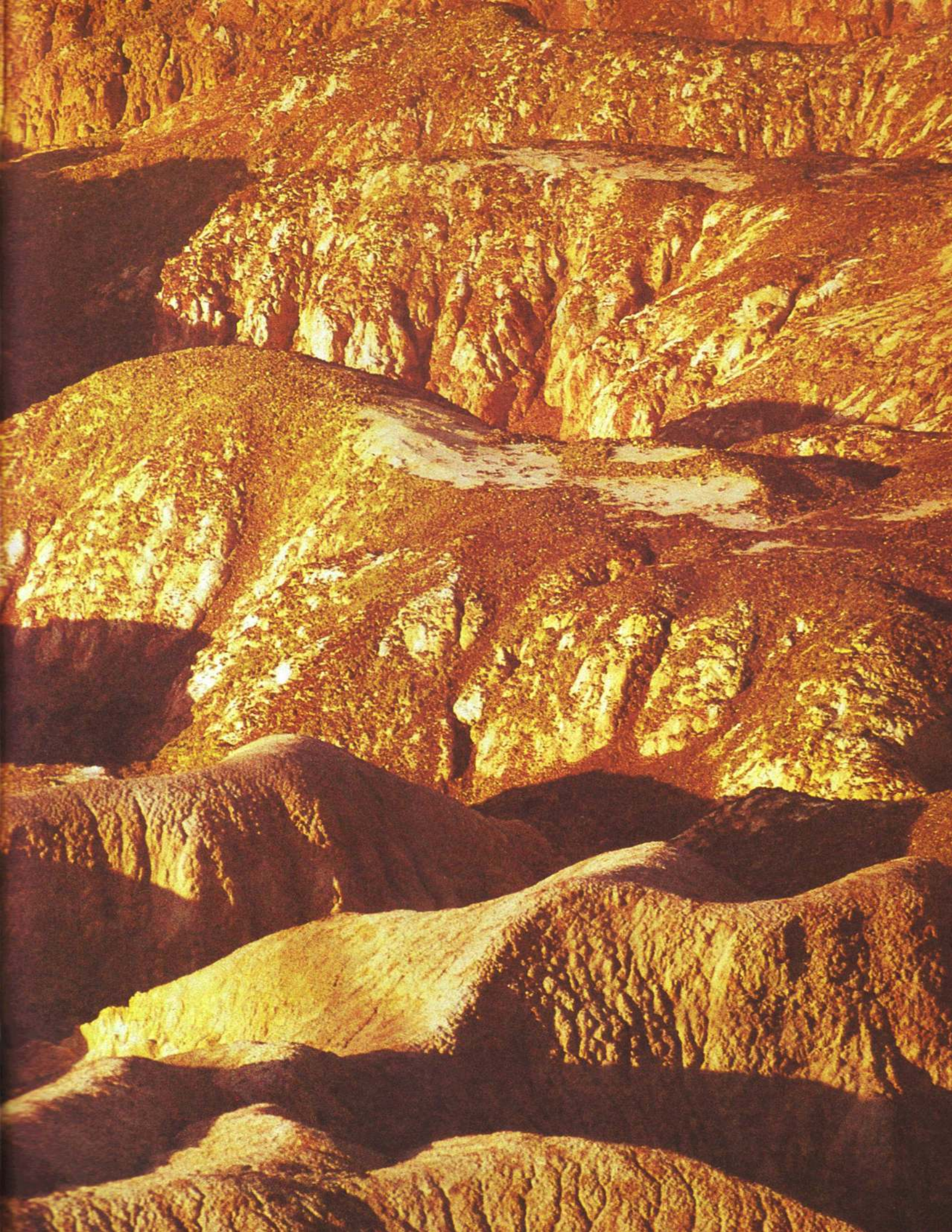
RED HILLS

In the bleak, grey steppe you suddenly see ranges of tall hills, and fiery-red ones at that! At first I thought it was a mirage. But in the steppe or desert a mirage is a streaky haze on the horizon, perhaps a river or a lake with islands floating on the water. But these red hills were stationary and you could see them distinctly. Coming closer you saw that clear-cut grooves had been worn out by water down the slopes, and the summits had been smoothed and rounded by winds.

The twisting passages between these massed-up red hills invited you to go in, and the turns and corners tempted you to peep round them. As you walked between those rough red walls everything alerted your sight and hearing. A huge-eyed eagle-owl suddenly flew out of a dark niche and floated behind a turn on his wide, soft wings. Ruddy sheldrakes took off from a cornice, their brittle wings whistling. Strange, steppeland bullfinches sat at the cracks, mewing like kittens.

There were curious plants that looked like tiny baobabs, strange yellow poppies, creepers that were like hedgehogs rolled into a ball, beds of unfamiliar pink flowers that seemed so sweet yet they pinched your fingers painfully when you touched them. And everywhere there was a white crust of salt on the red soil.

A fantastic world of red hills, curious birds and plants!



STRIPED LIZARD

It is striped, true to its name, and what else can one say about it? It's slender, quick and nimble. It lives in places where the soil is sandy or clayey, and hides in its own holes and also those of others. It hunts in the daytime, catching beetles, grasshoppers, spiders and ants on the ground, in the grass, and even on small bushes which it climbs easily. After a good hunt and a good meal it sprawls in the sun. For the night it digs itself into the sand or hides in a hole.

These lizards lay their eggs on the sand, and when summer comes the eggs crack open and out climbs a brood of tiny little lizards as neatly striped as their parents.

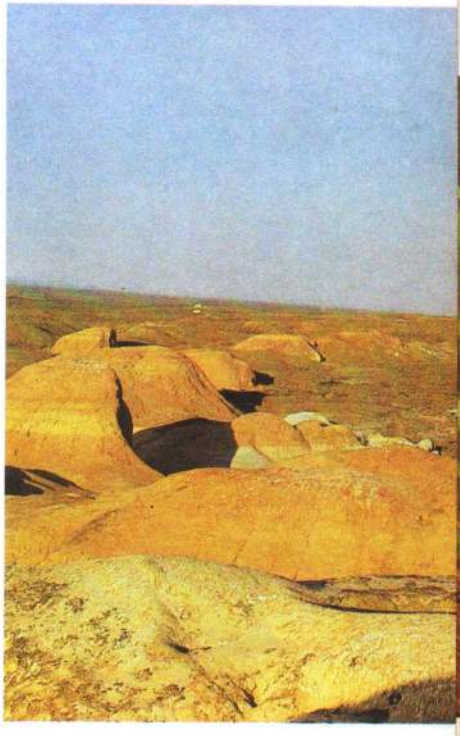
Well, that's about all. If anyone wants to know more, let him do some observations himself.

SCARAB

The most famous beetle in the world is the sacred scarab. According to the Ancient Egyptians a scarab once rolled the sun itself! Nowadays everyone knows that it's an ordinary dung-beetle. But just the same it is a remarkable beetle because it knows how to make balls out of dung and roll them along the ground. On his head, mind you.

These balls are the dung-beetle's food stores, and he values them dearly. His rivals try to get the ball away from him and then a scuffle starts, each fighting for the prize, to roll away, bury in the ground, and eat later, in peace and quiet.

But the first thing is to make a ball. A dung-beetle breaks off a bit of dung, sits on it and begins to mould it. When it is the size of an apricot, he stands on his head and rolls it with his feet. It's a very tiring and troublesome job, because the ball might get stuck in a crack and have to be eased out, or it might roll downhill accidentally and have to be pushed up again. In the meantime the rival beetles won't let the owner of the ball alone and make a nuisance of themselves scrambling for the prize. So the sooner he can get it buried in the ground, the better.



APOLLO

All butterflies live in danger of being caught and pinned down, but none have it harder than the Apollos because they are so pretty and so varied in colour. Every butterfly lover tries to catch as great a variety of them as he can for his collection.

The more butterflies are stuck on pins, the fewer there are on flowers, of course. In many countries, pretty butterflies have long become a rarity and are protected by law. In the Soviet Union all butterflies have also been listed, and heading the list is the Apollo with red circles on snow-white wings.

PIED WHEATEAR

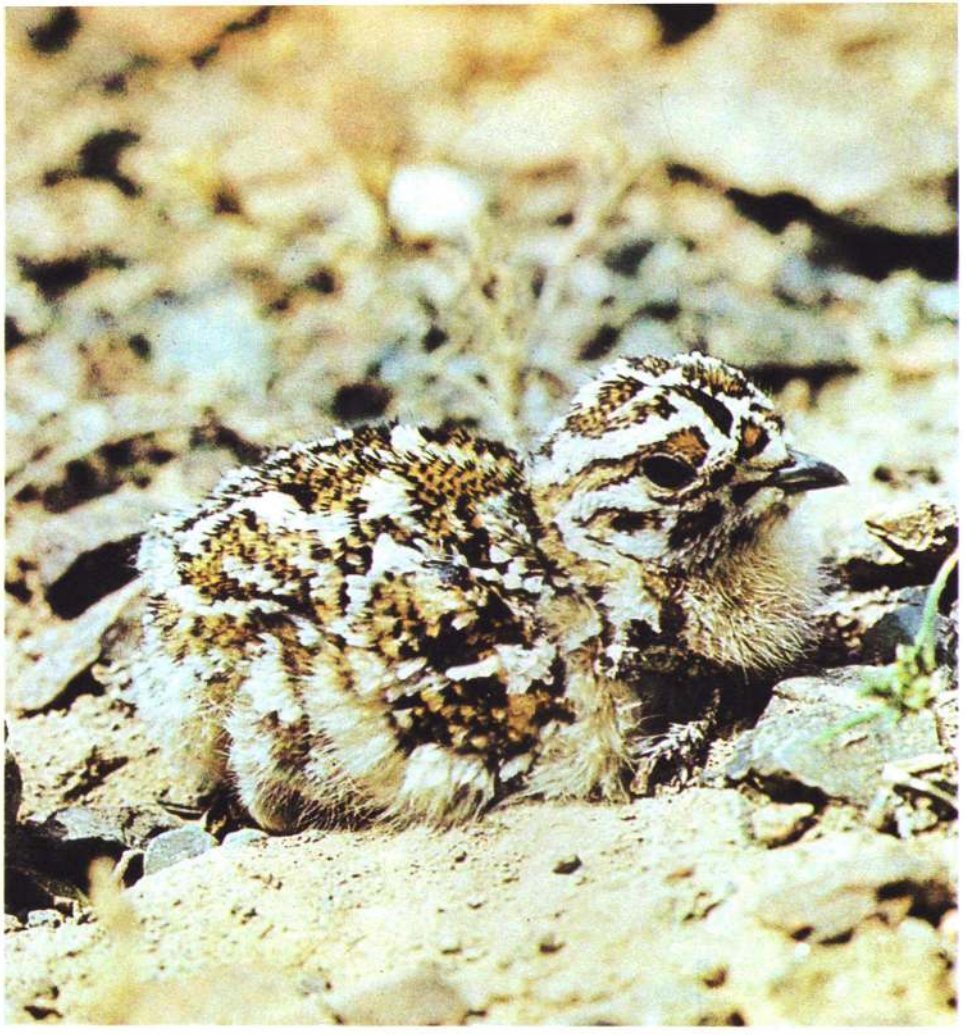
This little bird with a white spot on its pate spends all its life among stones. That is why it is called *kamenka* in Russian, from the word *kamen*—stone. It rests on stones and preens its feathers standing on a stone. From there it spies the land for prey—bugs, grasshoppers and butterflies. Its nest it also builds in a safe little crevice under a rock.

The fledglings prefer to crawl out on to the stones, rather than sit in the nest. They warm their bones in the sun, stretch their legs, clean their feathers, gaze about them, and if they are lucky—catch a fly or two. At the merest sign of danger they dive into the crevice. The mother alone stays outside, sitting quite a distance away from the nest and giving small warning cries. She is worried, of course, but not too badly, because she knows that her children are safe in that stone crevice where no enemy can see or get at them.

VULTURE

Fast legs feed the wolf, it is said, and sharp eyes feed the vulture. Their eyes are not very large, but very, very keen. They miss nothing, big or small: a herd of saigas or a sleeping baby saiga, a pack of wolves or the remains of their feast, a caravan of huge camels or some barely visible dung-beetles. They would watch a shepherd dressing a sheep.

Vultures never take their eyes off one another either. Aha, that fellow-vulture over there has folded his wings and hurtled down after something he has sighted on the ground! Better make haste lest the other fellows get there first! But the others have been watching as keenly, they have already taken off the rocks and are swooping down. Only moments ago there seemed to be only one vulture in the sky, and now there's a whole flock, wheeling lower and lower and dropping on the ground, only to start running, waddling clumsily, dragging their heavy wings, jostling and pushing and fighting for the loot. When they have all stuffed themselves full, they lie down, like so many tired turkeys, and sleep until they feel hungry again.



PALLAS'S SANDGROUSE AND HER YOUNG

This bird has such short legs with fat, fluffy toes tensed into a sort of hard hoof that from afar it appears to be creeping and not walking on the ground.

If a sandgrouse does not fly away at your approach and goes crawling round and round, it means that she has her young somewhere near.

The babies are sweet little things, but they are so little and so well camouflaged that you might easily step on one if you are not careful. You'd better watch your step, and better still go away altogether. It's a pity, of course, that you did not see them, and so we've photographed one specially for you. Here it is for everyone to see, for people who have never been to the steppes and for people who have been there, seen the anxious mother sandgrouse, but did not

hang round looking for the chicks and tactfully and quickly went away, always watching their step.

* * *

In different parts of the Soviet Union you will find, besides the widespread birds and beasts, some very beautiful butterflies, birds and animals that are already becoming rare.

Of course, every country has its inimitably beautiful forests, lakes, mountains and plains, and taken together they comprise the wealth of the world we all share. It is a bright world, as many-coloured as the rainbow, and let its brightness never be dimmed.

Red
Steppe

Orange
Ruins

Yellow
Sands

Green
Valley

Blue Lake

Blue Mountains

Mauve Canyon

Red Hills

Nikolai Sladkov has travelled far and wide
in the Soviet Union, always armed with a camera
to be able to illustrate his verbal impressions
of all the curious sights he has seen.
He has roamed steppes and deserts,
descended into deep chasms, explored the caves
and glaciers in the Pamirs,
and studied the submarine kingdom.
Every fresh encounter with the unfamiliar and
the unknown inspires Sladkov to share his excitement
and joy with everyone, and his writings are full
of warmth, compassion, charm and humour.
In his books Sladkov introduces children
to the fascinating world of Nature
with its multiplicity of colours and voices.

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